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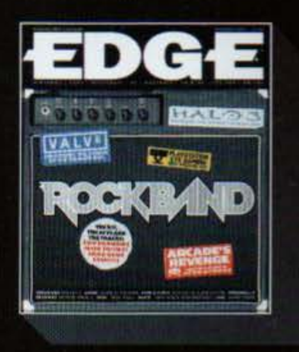
ROCKBAND

THE KIT, THE ACTS AND THE TRACKS: HOW HARMONIX MADE THE BEST MUSIC GAME EVER (!!!)



PREVIEWED FAR CRY 2 **SPORE** ALONE IN THE DARK **KANE & LYNCH** RATCHET & CLANK FUTURE **SPEEDBALL 2**
REVIEWED METROID PRIME 3 **PGR4** SEGA RALLY **SKATE** JOHN WOO'S STRANGLEHOLD **LAIR** QUAKE WARS


VIRTUAL RAIL
20 AUG 07
>>12<<
DAY TRAVELCARD
VIRTUAL RAIL



Honestly, you wait five years for another exclamation mark to appear on the cover of **Edge**, and then three of the vulgar little swines turn up at once. But that's the thing about *Rock Band* (see p46): it presses those hard-to-reach buttons that change the way you carry yourself.

Rock Band isn't something you play, it's something you perform, more so than any other music-based game. Yes, it has much in common with its spiritual predecessor, *Guitar Hero* – the two games are, after all, from the same developer, Harmonix – but in broadening its scope to encompass vocals and drums it swaggers up to stand on a different plateau.

Every game is enhanced when it is being shared with friends, and because *Rock Band*'s currency is music, not spacecraft or race cars or falling blocks, it so much more easily lights the touchpaper. And then turns you into the kind of thing that launches itself at items of furniture, and thinks about posting 'Drummer wanted' ads on the internet, and, yes, starts flinging around the punctuation equivalent of leather trousers.

Of course, there are many more games featured within this issue that do not demand the wielding of plastic peripherals. We visit Valve, for example, to discover more about the making of *The Orange Box* (see p62), a standard-setting game collection we unfortunately don't get to review before its release because of exclusivity agreements (but we'll say it here, anyway: buy it). Then there's the section of titles we *are* allowed to officially recommend (or not), headed up by *Halo 3* (see p80), another experience that emphasises just how much more is thrown into the pot when friends are on board.

Finally, this issue we welcome into the **Edge** fold a new columnist, N'Gai Croal (see p122), and cue up the arrival of another new face in issue 182. Until then, it's back to the talcum powder.



EDGE

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"'Shit Sandwich'"







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CONTENTS

NOVEMBER

This month

Every month



CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review



METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION

Wii 84

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 4



360 86

SEGA RALLY



360, PS3 89

LAIR



PS3 90

SRANGLEHOLD



360, PC, PS3 91

PERSONA 3



PS2 94

SINGSTAR





PS3 95

TWO WORLDS



360, PC 96

JAM SESSIONS



DS 97

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS





PSP 97

WORLD IN CONFLICT



360, PC 98

ETERNAL SONATA

360 98

PHOENIX WRIGHT 3



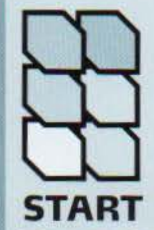
DS 99

SONIC RUSH ADVENTURE



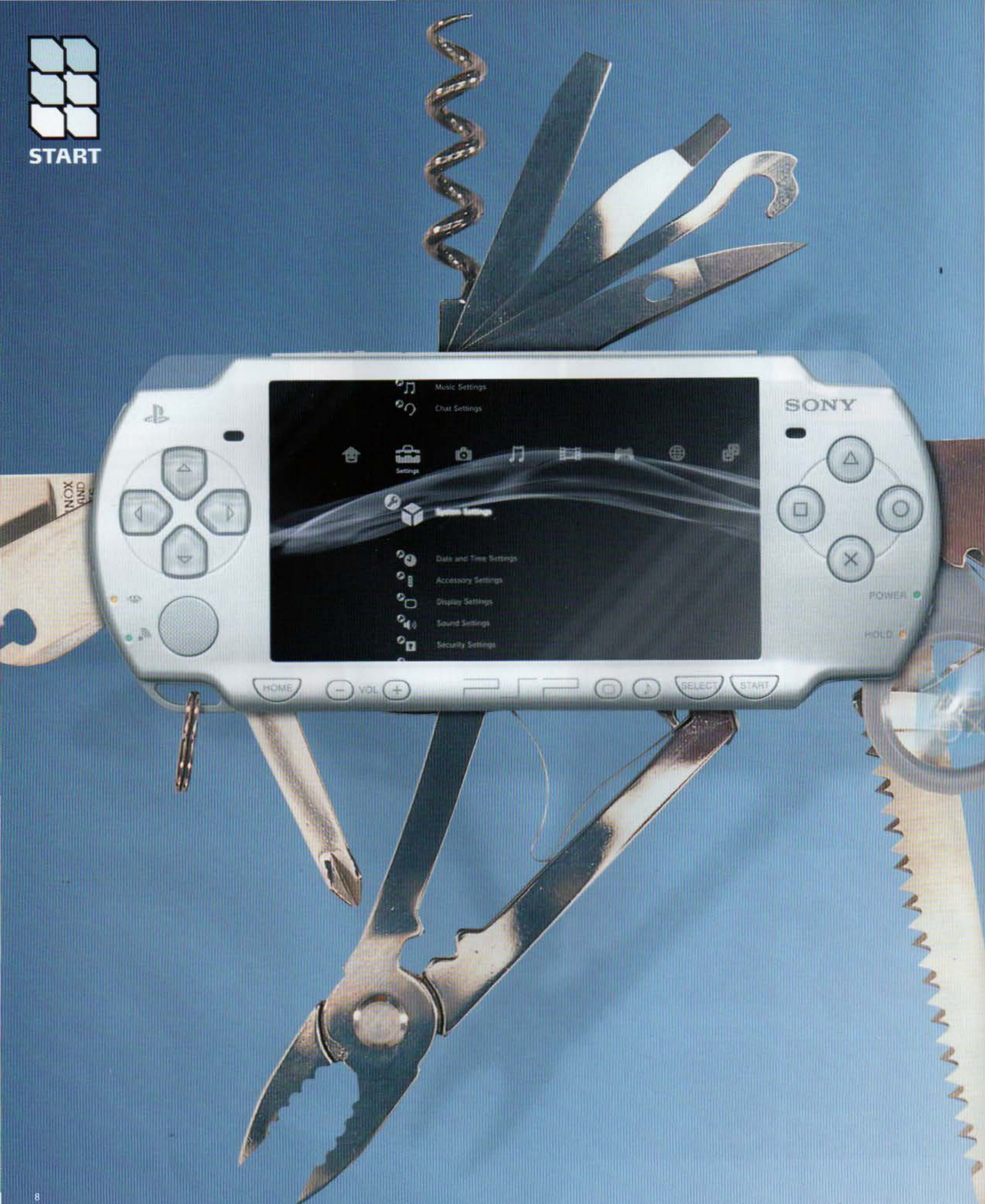
DS 99





START




START
Music Settings
Chat Settings
Settings
Date and Time Settings
Accessory Settings
Display Settings
Sound Settings
Security Settings
SONY
POWER
HOLD
HOME
VOL
SELECT
START

HARDWARE

Is do-it-all hardware the sensible solution?

Sony's Leipzig press conference furnished the PlayStation family with yet more functions – but what about the games?

Sony's much-heralded set of second-generation PS3 games – *Warhawk*, *Lair* and *Heavenly Sword* – are out. And though they're crucial to bolstering sales of the console, which continue to trail those of its competitors, they've largely failed to epitomise the 'must-have' status that Sony so desperately needs in the long run-up to Christmas. Meanwhile, Square Enix president Yoichi Wada has warned that PS3's future will be 'tough' if Sony doesn't 'straighten up' its marketing strategy by being clearer about its identity as either a videogame machine or entertainment hub.

Such was the context of Sony's press conference at the recent Leipzig Games Convention, presented by SCEE president **David Reeves**. It didn't stop him claiming that PS3 enjoyed a faster sales curve in its first three months than PS2 and giving a bullish sales projection of 140m PlayStation consoles in Europe by 2010 (Sony reported that, as of March 2007, it had shipped around 95 million PS1s, PS2s and PSPs to the region). But, taken at face value, the conference did little to address Wada's fear that Sony seems unable to find a strong basis on which to demonstrate its hardware's appeal. Because, instead of concentrating on showing off the next generation of core gamer titles, it focused more on revealing still further its ambitions for PS3 and PSP as high-end, multipurpose entertainment devices.

Square Enix president Yoichi Wada has warned that PS3's future will be 'tough' is Sony doesn't start being clearer about the machine's identity

Announced with the statement that it would "turn your PS3 into the centre of your entertainment experience", Play TV, PS3's forthcoming Freeview digital TV tuner, will allow the console to display both SD and HD signals (where available) and record them on to its hard drive. Due for release in the UK in early 2008, the typically slickly designed system will also allow users to export recordings and their

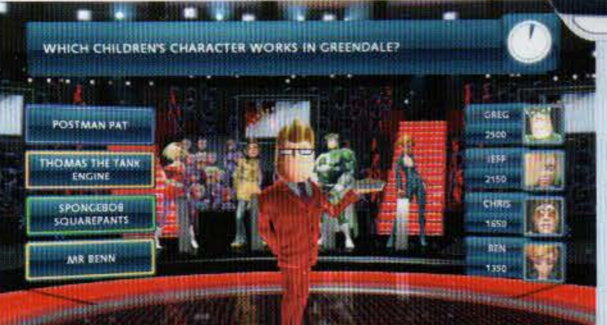


Go! Explore (above) adds sat-nav functionality to the PSP hardware to go along with the multitude of other non-gaming features in its locker



SCEE's David Reeves described the PS3 launch in triumphant terms, but hardware sales on a worldwide basis remain modest. No doubt the upcoming price cut will stir some activity







There was much emphasis at Leipzig on Sony's efforts to court the social gaming scene with titles like *Buzz!* and *SingStar*, but when games of this ilk don't demand PS3-scale grunt, will their potential audience really be eager to migrate to the £425 platform?

While companies such as Nokia are trying to push mobile gaming, Sony is working back the other way. With BT's support, PSP is becoming a powerful video communication device

home TV viewing over the internet to their PSPs using Remote Play. It's an undeniably attractive feature, and one that's clearly tuned to drive handheld console sales.

Also sure to broaden PSP's appeal were Reeves' announcements that the handheld will receive more offerings as part of its Go! set of non-gaming peripherals. Go! Messenger, a collaboration with BT, will add voice and video chat through Sony's Go! Camera (turning your PSP into a VOIP system), as well as instant messaging. Go! Explore, meanwhile, is a convincing-looking satellite navigation add-on with an attractively smooth 3D interface that features landmark buildings, and shames many dedicated sat-nav devices. And then there's distribution of Sky TV content through PSP, including sports, entertainment, movies, music and animation, through a service called Go! Video Download. With subscription and pay-per-view options, users will be able to download directly to their PSPs through wifi, or via PCs and transferred by USB link-up.

Attractive as they may seem to tech enthusiasts, however, these are hardly features that will appeal to the vast market of more casual players to whom Nintendo has marketed so effectively. So, fittingly, the other side to Reeves' press conference was further confirmation of Sony's commitment to the emerging form of 'social games', epitomised by *Buzz!* and *SingStar*. Proud that *SingStar* has sold so well over Europe, Reeves thanked Phil Harrison for "bringing social gaming to Europe". It's in these games, and those that will utilise the PlayStation Eye hardware (see facing page), that Sony is doing the most to make its offerings distinct from Nintendo's and Microsoft's.

Crucial to both *SingStar* and *Buzz!* on PS3 is PlayStation Network, through which expansions in the form of extra songs and quiz questions will be distributed. *SingStar* will feature user-uploaded videos of performances and *Buzz!* players will be able to upload their own sets of quiz questions and download those made by other users. Along with the ability to buy *Warhawk* via its store, it's an indication of Sony's continuing commitment to making PlayStation Network an essential element of the PS3 picture. Reeves reported that 645,000 PS3 accounts have been signed up to date, which amounts to almost half the European userbase. Unfortunately, various server problems with *Warhawk*'s online multiplayer, as well as many PS3 owners complaining of protracted and interrupted attempts to download content from the network, currently conspire to make PSN a rather less smooth experience than Xbox Live.

These niggles, along with PS3's comparatively high price, mean that it's hard to see the console as an attractive purchase for the more casual players Sony's social gaming strategy is so adept at targeting. Certainly, the PS3's installed base mostly consists of commited players with eyes locked firmly on the likes of *Killzone 2*, *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Drake's Fortune*. As for the broader audience the Leipzig press conference seemed to address, it's easy to imagine it already having opted to buy Wiis and DSes. It will be interesting to see what the PS3 price cut, set to happen before Christmas, will do for the console's profile.

Though there was much to admire in Sony's announcements at Leipzig, the presentation did little to assuage the feeling that its strategy is schizophrenic: some tech toys here, some casual games there, some traditional core gaming over there. And, nowadays, image is more important than ever. Just ask Microsoft.



Its Blu-ray playback may make the PS3 price more understandable, but the new disc format has yet to really drive sales. To Joe Average, the Play TV add-on (below) may yet prove to be a more attractive prospect



Eye play

How the first wave of PS Eye software shapes up

The hardware launched in the summer, but the first PlayStation Eye-compatible software is finally arriving to take advantage of four times the resolution, twice the framerate and twice the sensitivity of the old EyeToy hardware.

Hopefully the software will similarly improve on the last generation, but so far it's a mixed bag. *Aqua Vitae* is simply an ambient screensaver of tropical fish, which can be fed by rubbing your fingers at the top of the virtual tank. *Trials Of Topoq* is a ball-rolling game built around levels that individually show video feed: as your arms and body move you're able to raise areas of floor, creating slopes and catchment areas for the ball as it moves downwards. The levels become progressively tricky, and there is a definite learning curve involved, but it can prove irritating simply because you're never actually rolling the ball with your movement, but rolling it with blocks that are raised because of that movement.

EyeToy saw more innovative use emerge as time passed, and the ample possibilities for online play are yet to be explored

By far the highpoint of the 'launch' titles is *Operation: Creature Feature*. This game features little monster types called 'blurbs' that are attracted to movement from the camera, and have to be guided around single-screen mazes containing various environmental hazards. Their responses to your movement are quick, particularly if using 'jazz hands', and combined with their odd sounds make the game a very responsive diversion. It is a short experience, but highly enjoyable, and feels like one of the first 'camera detection' games that can be genuinely praised without any caveats. Regardless, both it and *Trials Of Topoq* stand as proof-of-concept if nothing else, because they wouldn't be possible in the same manner with any other interface. *Eye Of Judgment*, as an unofficial launch title, makes a bizarre contrast to the others, and is more remarkable for using the technology in a decidedly archaic fashion than any innovative gameplay uses. In particular, the absence of specific battle animations feels like an opportunity missed rather than a prospect seized, and the fact that your interactions with the digital images raised from the cards can only take on three forms suggests an acceptance on the part of the developer that this title will be selling to a captive audience rather than seeking to grab new players.

In addition to these titles, other PS Eye incorporations are being introduced on a more simple level: the otherwise unremarkable *Snakeball* has the capacity for players to put pictures of their own faces on its vehicles, while *Singstar* allows users to record performances for replay. EyeToy, of course, saw more innovative use emerge as time passed – with the likes of *EyeToy Kinetic*, for example – and the ample possibilities for online play with PS Eye (which can record audio as well as change its focus from a gaming panorama to a simple shot of the player's head and shoulders) are yet to be explored.

The PlayStation Eye hardware is as robust as you'd hope, and its processing capacity is significantly in excess of its predecessor's



Aqua Vitae's entertainment value is about the same as that of any screensaver, and the interactivity PS Eye delivers is of negligible additional value. You can, however, choose the type of fish in the tank. (Also, don't forget that some people buy DVDs of this stuff)









From top: *Eye Of Judgment*, *Operation: Creature Feature*, *Snakeball*, and *Trials Of Topoq*. Each game makes its own use of PS Eye-imported data, and make it clear that we're going to see more experimentally skewed Eye games in the future

SOUND BYTES

"Top brass barred the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Nintendo DS systems after discovering they contain software that enables users to send or receive radio signals. Security experts fear they could be used by terror suspects to talk to accomplices and plot carnage. They also warned in a report seen by The Sun that the earlier PlayStation 2 – currently allowed in jails – could be modified for covert chats"
The Sun exposes console terror link shock

"Using the retro pixel look has served us well. Our graphics look just as old now as they did seven years ago"
Lead designer **Sulka Haro** celebrates Habbo Hotel's stylings at the Austin Game Developers Conference

"It is not Sony or Insomniac who defile the Manchester Cathedral in *Resistance: Fall Of Man*. It is the Chimera who do... When the dust settles, the cathedral empties, and the player is left to spend as much or as little time as he wants exploring the cavernous interior... It is a time to pause, to reflect, perhaps even to meditate on the relationship between God, human, and alien"
Game researcher, critic and designer **Ian Bogost** spiritedly defends Insomniac's shooter

"[Sixaxis motion control] seems to alienate some reviewers who seem to have a hate for all things motion, be it *Wii Sports* with sometimes absurdly low scores for what might become the defining game of this generation, or *Lair* as their newest poster child of evil"
Factor 5 chief **Julian Eggebrecht** believes his game is just misunderstood



Euro gaming enjoys another fine Messe

Record numbers attend as the Leipzig Games Convention's ambitions increase

The figures say it all: Leipzig's rapid growth and internationalisation is undoubtedly the result of the E3-shaped vacuum left in the videogame industry calendar. The number of exhibitors rose by almost a third over last year, and the number of foreign trade visitors nearly doubled. In E3's wake, it seems that the videogaming world is turning to Leipzig as its preferred consumer fair. But Leipzig's success isn't merely something it has won by default; Games Convention seems to be embracing its increasing popularity with optimism and responsibility.

"For the next GC we will build another pedestrian overpass between exhibition halls so as to better divide up the flow of visitors," says **Josef Rahmen**, managing director of the Leipziger Messe, anticipating a further rise in visitors next year. The buildings that comprise the convention centre house an ample space which organisers have divided up and arranged with a fair amount of logistical acumen. The consumer areas are split among four gigantic halls, whose wide walkways managed to cope with 185,000 visitors that surged into the convention centre over the course of its four-day duration.

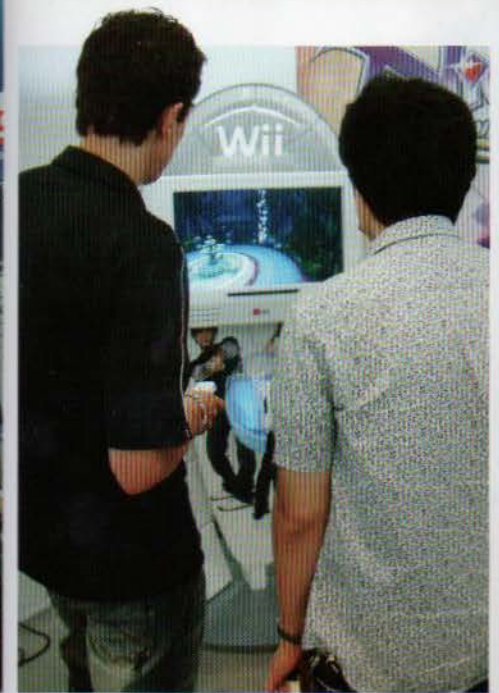
The business and consumer sides are wisely separated – the business centre, itself split across two large buildings, sedately contains the important closed-door sessions away from the fleshy throng of consumers. But even in the packed public halls, while full of the lavish displays you'd expect from an E3-styled event, the noise and lightshows never became oppressive or offensively gaudy, the crowds never unbearably stifling.

Microsoft had gone for a beach theme for its exhibition, palm trees and sand included. Sony, meanwhile, had decked out its space with vintage, ornate furniture, in some way reflecting its 'This is Living' sloganeering. Nintendo's stand? Full of gently backlit white curtains and elegant veils. All three were manned, if that is the right word, by the booth babes for which gaming conventions have become famous. In fact, nowhere in the entire Messe could you be served a drink by someone who wasn't in possession of cleavage, and in many cases such diversions seemed to be placed on display as much as the games themselves. Even the business centre was almost entirely staffed by legions of pert German girls, politely guarding doors and inspecting badges. With the number of women attending videogame-focused events on the increase, it was certainly something to ponder.

Twenty per cent of GC attendees were female this year, marking a three-point increase – and the



There was no shortage of males eager to have their photos taken with the hired help, although certain specimens were clearly more carefully styled than others





The visual bustle of Sony's stand (above) couldn't have been more different from Nintendo's minimalism (below). The Business Centre (right) offered respite from the throng of the show floor



average age of visitors was on the rise, too. It was a fact that the Nintendo press conference dwelled upon heavily, making much of the company's recent successes in penetrating audiences outside of the hardcore gaming market. Although delivering little information that wasn't already evident, Bernd Fakesch, general manager of Nintendo of Germany, and Patrick Ensign, marketing assistant manager, did a good job of congratulating themselves, justifiably, on their massive success. Some statistics in particular stood out as remarkable: over a million copies of *Nintendogs* have been sold in Germany alone, while *Brain Training* is on course to sell 750,000 copies in the territory for its second year. Nintendo possesses a 65 per cent market share of game console hardware in Germany, and is the number one game software publisher in the region. And the success story shows no sign of easing just yet.

Over a million copies of Nintendogs have been sold in Germany alone, while Brain Training is on course to sell 750,000 copies in the territory for its second year running

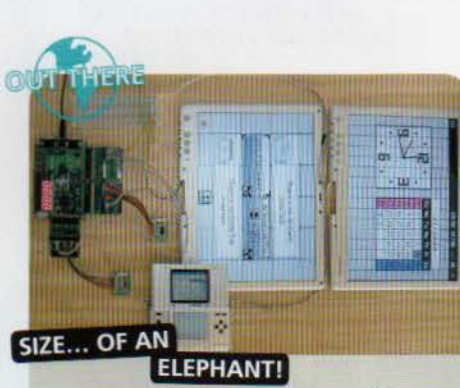
Sony's conference followed a similar pattern, in that it emphasised markets outside that of the traditional gamer, pointing to 'social gaming' products like *SingStar* and their appeal to women, and making efforts to capitalise on interest in other forms of media. With PlayTV turning the PlayStation 3 hardware into a Freeview and PVR box, Sky offering on-demand programs for download to PSP, and the Go! suite of services broadening the handheld's usage as a messenger and GPS unit, it seems that Sony is keen to make its products appeal to an audience beyond that of gaming (see page 9). Listening to president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe **David Reeves**' presentation, however, you might think that the company has no need to diversify so broadly, so successful has the PS3 rollout proved to date. His claims of a "stunning" European launch and "impressive pattern of growth" may raise eyebrows among those working at Sony's competitors, but the recent Starter Pack push seems to have been a success, with sales in Germany alone enjoying a 240 per cent boost in sales.

If one thing unites all of the exhibitors' presentations at Leipzig it is a sense of optimism. Whereas E3's structure often made navigating the event a painful experience, Leipzig feels a lot more like a celebration of gaming by its many attendees, commercial and consumer alike. If it can maintain this comparative modesty in the face of ever-growing popularity then it has the opportunity to lead the mainstream perception of the gaming industry into a new era – although what that means for local models looking to spend four days meeting game geeks is anyone's guess.



Microsoft dressed its corner of the conference centre with a tropical theme, shipping in palm trees and sand. Despite the heat and dust we weren't able to spot a single Red Ring of Death

OUT THERE



SIZE... OF AN ELEPHANT!

With Nintendo attempting to court 'grey gamers' it was only a matter of time before the continuing miniaturisation of portable gaming became an issue with those of failing vision. This particular solution, however, was somewhat unexpected: one dedicated soul by the apt name of Loopy has found a way of hooking up a Nintendo DS to a pair of tablet PC screens, increasing the display size by a factor of 4.7. Of course, with project costs amounting to something in the region of $600 (£296), the Jumbotron is a little pricier than a pair of Specsavers bifocals.

home.comcast.net/~olimar/DS/jumbotron/



INTERVIEW

The Eye has it

How Sony's PS3 camera technology is being put to work in a board/videogame blend

Among the releases to make use of the PS3 Playstation Eye peripheral, one in particular stands out – for its incorporation of new tech into an established, and niche, concept, but also for the other possibilities it provides. Here, *Eye Of Judgment* producer **Yusuke Watanabe** (above left) explains the concept.

What was the inspiration for the concept behind *Eye Of Judgment*?

When I first saw the new technology of the Sony camera there was a wow factor for me – I wanted to introduce that wow factor to others. So when I thought about how to do that in a game concept I thought first of using it to play with trading cards in a different way.

"A few years ago we were just talking, saying: 'Oh, wouldn't it be great if a character jumped out of a card'. And then technology eventually caught up. So always keep hold of your ideas"

Is *Eye Of Judgment* a normal trading card game underneath the technology?

The trading card game base is there in *Eye Of Judgment*, and on top of that you have the appeal of a board game; it's part of the tactile feel of the game that might appeal to a wider audience. It's a bit like chess. There's a wonderful mixture of elements that comes together. I think the fact that I wasn't a trading card player before coming to this game helped in thinking about how to make the game appeal to more people. Each of the cards has the statistics on it, so they can be used without the videogame. But if only one friend has a PS3, then I'd hope the group of friends could arrange for a visit to play with the camera and game!

Do you feel that using technology as an access point to a traditional pastime is a way to attract non-gamers to that tech?

Yes, I think this is one of the strategies that will move the PS3 along in the future. And I think it'll appeal to some segments outside of gamers as well as gamers. It's a way for us to expand our audience, definitely.

As a game producer, what would you say are the most important things about *Eye Of Judgment*'s concept?

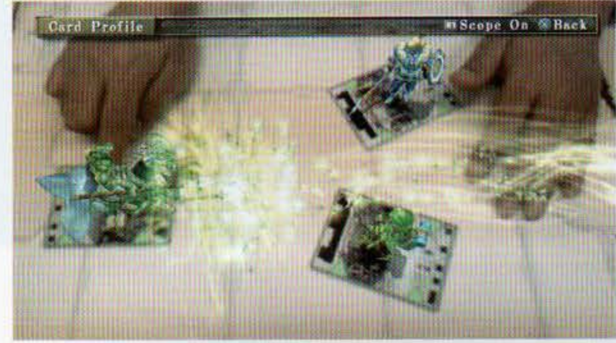
I think the first thing you have to have is a curiosity, even about the smallest things, and second you must have the drive to pursue that. The third thing is that, with *Eye Of Judgment*, a few years ago we were just talking about it around the dinner table, saying: 'Oh, wouldn't it be great if a character jumped out of a card'. And then technology eventually caught up. So always keep hold of your ideas, and never brush off anything as an idea that will never happen – because it will happen in the future. Keeping faith with your ideas is the third and final ingredient.

How can you stop people pirating the game's cards by photocopying and so on?

Basically, the card is created in a way that colour copies or scans simply won't work with the Eye, so without some industrial equipment an effective copy can't be made. Some people might find ways, but it would take a lot of effort.

What about plans for DLC and expansions in the future?

Being a trading card game, expansions are important for its appeal, so new cards will be introduced as we go along. It'll be introduced in a card form, and we'll make those cards downloadable and possibly even available on disc as well.



PS3's PlayStation Eye looks down upon a game board, and when cards are placed that card's inhabitant pops out – and they even respond (in a limited way) to your 'touch'





If you can get beyond some of the trading cards' uglier stylings, *Eye Of Judgment* has a deep layer of strategy on its small board

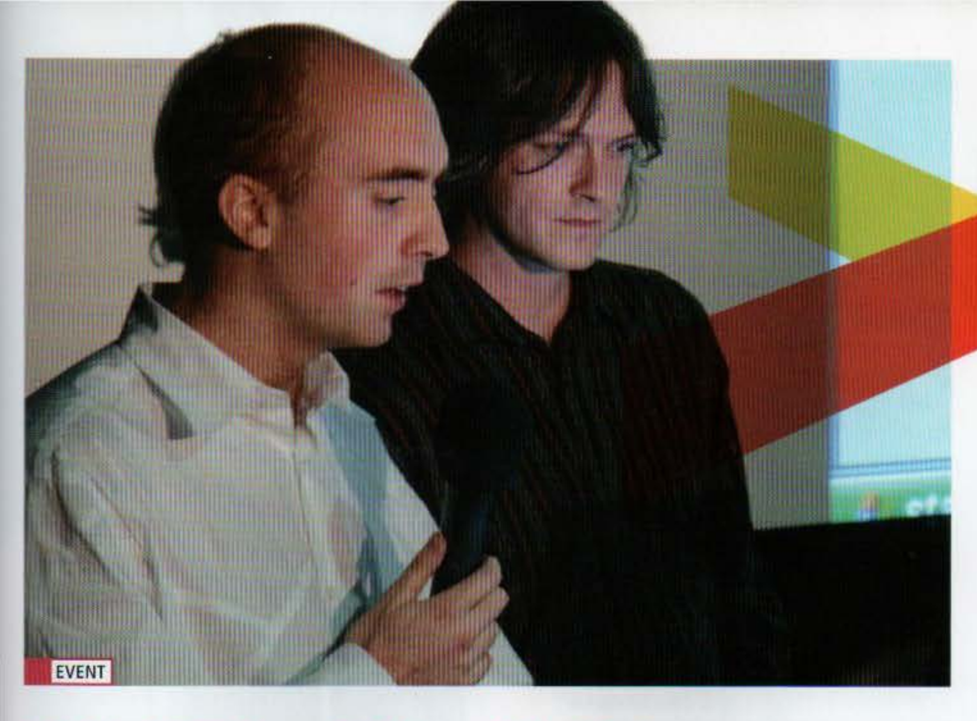
Newswire



FASA Studio closes doors

The developer behind *Shadowrun* disbanded earlier this month, following continuing rumours that the studio was in trouble. After the crossplatform multiplayer release received a lukewarm reception critically, FASA Studio manager Mitch Gitelman made headlines by hitting back at reviewers for not recognising innovation. Despite the playerbase being further eroded by the close release of the *Halo 3* beta, FASA Studio continued to release updates and support the community up until the official announcement of closure. On a brighter note, Gitelman was pleased to say that half the team has gone on to find positions within Microsoft.





EVENT

2007's City lights

Another wildly varied programme sees the UK gaming scene's newest celebration continue to innovate

Having appeared unexpectedly in 2006, the initial announcements of the first Nottingham GameCity festival were met with suspicion in some quarters. The questions were obvious, but no less important for it. Why another gaming show? Why Nottingham? Why bother? Following on the heels of development in the schizophrenic Edinburgh Games Festival/ Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival/ Edinburgh Interactive Festival, GameCity had its work cut out convincing the industry that its approach was in any way different to those other, industry-led initiatives. In the event, it transpired that much of the first festival's success was actually because of the independence that circumstances forced upon it: it simply did things which the corporate industry PR structure couldn't, or shouldn't – and not always for the better.

Well received by both public and professional audiences, the challenge lay in developing and sustaining its particular posture of programming, particularly in the face of an unexpected rescheduling from London Games Week.

If GameCity 2007 is about careful growth, its organisers perhaps need to readdress their benchmarks of what 'careful' means. Built around four days, the festival promises an opportunity not just to hear developers speak, but also to have tea and cake with them. Thursday sees David Braben showing more of *The Outsider*, plus an XNA showcase from Microsoft. Friday is dominated by Star Wars, both Lego and otherwise, with a garrison of stormtroopers guarding Jonathan Smith as he arrives to preview *The Complete Saga*. In continuing to build GameCity's film programme, a rough-cut screening of Danny Ledonne's Playing Columbine will also be screened.

The festival promises an opportunity not just to hear developers speak – Thursday sees David Braben showing more of The Outsider – but also to have tea and cake with them

Saturday sees the festival delivering its annual 'vision statement' keynote, which last year saw Lorne Lanning announcing *Citizen Siege*. This time, *Katamari Damacy* creator Keita Takahashi will be taking the stage to talk about his work and preview *Noby Noby Boy*. Representatives from **Edge** will also be present, leading a session on writing about games, while the confirmation of the presence of legendary *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov for Sunday has certainly elevated the event's stature.

Alongside this core programme of talks and screenings runs a series of workshops for parents, a gaming marquee in the Market Square, music workshops, student portfolio clinics and an indie showcase. With such breadth on offer, then, the core challenge for GameCity is surely keeping focus in an event with so many facets.



Sonic won't be on hand for coffee and biscuits at GameCity '07 – you'll have to make do with Darth Vader instead. A full schedule for the October 25-28 event is online at www.gamecity.org



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

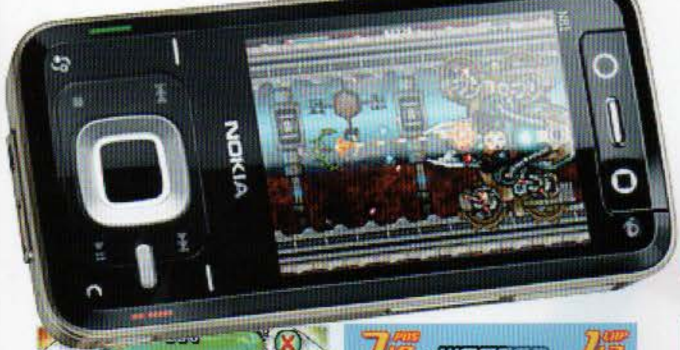
The Trigger Happy column ran over 60 issues and five years of Edge, exploring the loftiest concepts and the dirtiest corners of videogame culture with a precision that has rarely been matched. Author Steven Poole's star has continued to rise in other areas, but he has finally archived his game-focused columns on his homepage, complete with index. Needless to say, it is a resource containing some excellent work, and as a bonus it's presented in an uncluttered style. If wading through the lot in one sitting proves a little too much, you can take a break by following the link to the website of Poole's alter ego, Supreme Ultimate Fist, and the 'shiny kung fu pop beats', if you will, that lie therein.

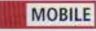
Site:
Steven Poole's **Edge** column archive
URL:
stevenpoole.net/trigger-happy/





Oddworld Inhabitants' Lorne Lanning and Free Radical Design's David Doak chew over the fat in a curry house at last year's event. Such gatherings define GameCity's novel approach





Handset and match?

Nokia claims its new tech will be all things to all users, but will it escape the same old games?



The interest in the new version of *Mile High Pinball* will lie in its downloadable tables. They come at a price, but with Nokia's keenness to make purchasing more attractive, it should be reasonable. *Creatures Of The Deep* (left), meanwhile, is a peaceful experience that feels oddly at home on the mobile platform – thanks in part to its use of the phone's tech, but also due to its quirky, undemanding nature

Mobile gaming has always suffered from something of an identity crisis. The games themselves receive almost blanket derision as the poor relations of their bigger brothers, and it's not hard to see why: the marketplace contains an abundance of poor-quality titles alongside 'ports' that bear little relation to the originals, combined with an interface that demands upfront investment of £3 to £6 based on no more than a game's name and a few lines of explanatory text. Moreover, phones' suitability as gaming devices in the most practical sense – their shapes and button configurations – and their role within the industry have never sat easily with each other.

That paints a bleak picture, but with major publishers establishing standalone mobile divisions the sector is moving inexorably towards maturity and, hopefully, an upturn in creativity. Nokia is now returning from the bloody nose of its original N-Gage by making several phones in its upcoming N-series (the N81, N73, N93, N93i, and N95, some 40 per cent of the range) incorporate its N-Gage interface, rather than making a gaming device that can be used as a phone. Theoretically, it's a sound move: not least because the prospects of a non-gamer ever buying the latter are low. In practical terms, the phones have a rounded button that can act as a D-pad, two gaming buttons alongside the screen, and can be used horizontally or vertically.

In practical terms, Nokia's new phones have a rounded button that can act as a D-pad, two gaming buttons alongside the screen, and can be used horizontally or vertically

The design is well integrated, and the basic interface is very highly 'inspired' by Xbox Live. There's Track My Progress, which is your gamerscore, although this distinguishes between points gained in singleplayer, multiplayer and community games. Show Room is where new games can be found and trialled, with a 'game of the week', and there is an assortment of rankings and leaderboards for the competitive urge. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the interface is the emphasis on playing with other people, whether competitively or co-operatively: approximately 50 per cent of launch titles are designed for multiplayer. It's a decision that may do more to bring about a growth in mobile gaming than any number of AAA titles from major publishers, though a killer app has yet to be seen.

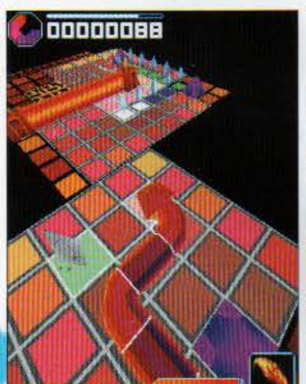
The latter consideration was the only lowpoint of Nokia's recent Go Play launch event. Despite the forward-looking technology and infrastructure, many of the games are still the usual suspects, the uninspired likes of *Space Impact Light*, *Asphalt Street Racing* and *FIFA '07*, and were presented as ticklists of features – an approach that can't hope to compete with more focused handhelds. But there was a brief glimpse of what the future could hold: *Creatures Of The Deep*, a fishing simulator, uses the phone's camera to allow a casting motion of the line, and GPS for geographically specific (though tongue-in-cheek) angling – such as being able to try catching Nessie if you're in Scotland.

These clever applications of the technology within the phone to games, and the incorporation or otherwise of the admirable infrastructure, will determine whether Nokia's new strategy can finally justify the status of mobile gaming as a truly important player in the industry, or if we'll have to wait another generation.



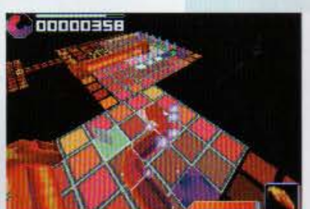


Nokia's range of new N-Gage-powered handsets is led by the excellent, all-singing N95 8GB (centre). At Go Play the company also launched a dedicated music download service









Following a long line of experiments with the basic concept, this is Nokia's latest incarnation of *Snake*, *Snakes Subsonic*. Like other recent updates, it plays in 2D but uses 3D graphics



The N-Gage frontend lets you cycle through various portals. The most interesting are the friends lists and achievement tracking that should add a level of competitive depth to mobile gaming














INTERVIEW

Talking tall tales

The man with a CV filled with classics – and a PS3 launch title – is back with a new adventure

The driving force behind *Gyruss*, *Time Pilot*, *1942*, *Street Fighter*, and *Resident Evil*, **Yoshiki Okamoto** (right) was a Capcom superstar. In 2004 he formed Game Republic, the company responsible for the infamous *Genji: Days Of The Blade*. We caught up with him to discuss his newest project, upcoming PS3 game *Folklore*.

How do you feel about making another flagship PS3 title, considering *Genji*'s poor reception?

In the case of *Genji* there were a lot of things I wanted to change and work on, but due to the time constraints of a launch title I couldn't. With this title we were able to spend more time developing it, so I'm a lot happier with it in every respect, from the mechanics to the graphics. I hope *Folklore* is good enough that it can bring new users to the hardware: that's how I think about a flagship title.

Does Keats' name and writerly occupation have anything to do with poet John Keats?

No, unfortunately. Is John Keats a cool character?

Absolutely.

If he's cool then, yes, I can assure you that Keats is based on John Keats.




Folklore features a variety of environments, but a criticism aimed at the Japanese release was that it's relatively linear in its story mode. That will all change dramatically with user-generated dungeons, however, which will be supported by Game Republic



Folklore centres around 'folks' that can be collected, much akin to *Pokémon*, which then become your attacks in a fluid battle system – each having their own strengths, weaknesses, and favourite sweet

***Folklore* allows users to create their own dungeons and upload them – how important do you think this element will prove to be?**

I know that a lot of FPS titles have been doing this for a long time, and often these user modifications have been incorporated into the games. But don't think about it just in terms of users: from a developer's point of view, it's very good to receive direct feedback from the players. They might come up with new ways, better ways, of playing the game that the development team haven't thought of. By looking at this direct input we can say: 'Hey, that's a cool way to use our game', and then think about it or build on it, look to take it further. There will definitely be a lot more of it in the future.

And in terms of DLC there are many things, among them additional outfits for Ellen...

Well, they're very sexy: you'll be able to enjoy playing through again and again. The testers chose to play through in those costumes. But many of the testers prefer women in the gameworld to the real world... These are the guys that created her, so there's a lot of depth to her character.

> **"Without knowhow and experience you can't create better things, and you always bring something of the things you feel have worked well into your new work"**

You say that the likes of *Pokémon* inspired *Folklore*, and you have a distinguished gaming past. Are these influences helpful, and is *Folklore* really something new?

Both. Without my past experience I couldn't have created this title. Without knowhow and experience you can't create better things, and you always bring something of the things you feel have worked well into your new work. But at the same time, realising a concept has something to do with the technology you're using, and it's as much about PS3 capabilities like the Sixaxis as it is the graphics. The initial concept was to base the narrative upon Irish folklore completely, but as we proceeded through the development it became more creative, and something unique.





Keats' attacks are directional and brawling, whereas Ellen summons folk remotely and uses them much like a summoner; attacks level up as you collect more folk

What's the recipe for making a great game?

The most important thing is the idea, the concept, and actually caring about it. Then there's the need for technology that can make that concept possible. Thirdly, very importantly, it has to be fun to play. And fourthly, you have to want to play it, so much so that even if you've cleared it you want to go back and play it over again. What is needed behind modern technology is an idea and teamwork, and when you put those things together you might get a great game.



THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

***Viva Piñata* is essentially about procreation. You gradually turn your hovel into a seduction pad, create the right atmosphere, and bring two of the same species together in the hope of them creating bouncing offspring. One man in Jacksonville, Florida, has taken *Viva Piñata* to its logical conclusion in the real world: after buying his girlfriend the game and a 360, he sent her the one diamond he'd found to ask for her hand in marriage. "When she got it, she giggled and said I was silly. Then I pulled out the real deal, got on a knee and started getting cried upon. She said yes, so next spring we're getting married!" Next step, mating dances?**



INTERVIEW

Psycho chillers

The new producer of the Silent Hill series talks about his plans for its evolution

William Oertel is the producer of *Silent Hill Origins* for PSP, and now the upcoming *Silent Hill V* for 360 and PS3, the first games in the franchise not to have been developed in Japan by Team Silent. We spoke to him about the issues of working on a successful franchise, its future, and the benefits of a pair of headphones.

So, what's it like to have taken over the *Silent Hill* series?
Taken over is such a harsh phrase. I am the producer on *Origins*, or *Zero* as it's going to be called, and I'm also the producer on *Silent Hill V*. It's a great property to work on and I have a lot of ideas for the future, but it's up to the powers that be to determine where the series goes from here.

"There are games you get utterly engrossed in and this is one of those experiences. Really you want to play this on your own with your headphones on"

How much innovation do you think can be brought to a series like *Silent Hill*?
With *V* we're not yet talking about the gameplay elements, but what we are discussing is the basic outline for the story setup, where you play this soldier called Alex Shepherd who's came back from a desert war. He's come home to his town called Shepherd's Glen, his dad's gone and his little brother is missing, and so that's the foundation for the latest chapter. So here you have this character coming back from a desert war that everyone has on their mind – whether they support it or hate it, it's a big topic and very raw to a lot of people. That creates a sense of no one understanding the very specific angle and experience of the soldiers who were there – they've just been watching it on the news and reading the papers. The soldiers are actually there, and on the battlefield morality is sometimes ambiguous – in terms of what seems right and wrong it can get confused. And that's a strong foundation for a *Silent Hill* story.

Perhaps an overarching theme of the series is the setting, and it physically reflecting the inner torment of the characters.
In *Origins* you start out with a truck, a burning house, a hospital. These locations tell you much about Travis and Alyssa before the things you see happen. After hospital you travel to the town and go to the mental asylum, and this sprawling level is very dark and a lot of the things you'll find in there relate to Travis and his story – it's the climax of what the character's already gone through, but then you've got to keep going. I think players find that they play this type of game for when it takes on a life of its own. They may like this character and then be challenged.

Are you aiming specifically for handheld gamers with *Origins* or hoping that the *Silent Hill* name will attract fans of the series?
A bit of both, I think. Whenever you release a big franchise you're giving people what they want to see on a platform. But the thing about *Silent Hill* is that it's a curious game, so the opportunity is there for people to try something new on their PSP, a very tight, psychologically intensive experience. There are games you get utterly engrossed in and this is one of those experiences. Really you want to play this on your own with your headphones on – that's how you're going to get the most out of this. Headphones are good at isolating things and that can be a real asset of a handheld system, and we hope people use them for our game.



Oertel (right) steps into the shoes of Team Silent, as the series' development moves outside of Japan. *Silent Hill Origins* (above and top) is a prequel to the first *Silent Hill* game, but introduces new characters

INDUSTRY

EU boosts game funding

UK developers stand to benefit from a new programme offering financial support to interactive media

In a move that acknowledges the scale and significance of the videogame industry, the European Commission has permitted MEDIA, its support programme for the audiovisual industry, to dole out non-repayable sums of up to €100,000 (£68,000) to game developers.

Developers will be able to claim funding for up to 50 per cent of a project's total prototyping budget, or 60 per cent should the game deal with specifically European issues such as its history and cultural diversity. Developers must have their head offices in Europe and have had at least one game commercially distributed since January 1, 2005. This fund comes from a budget totalling €1.5m (£1,010,000) for the entire interactive media industry over the next financial year, split between two application periods, with deadlines of November 15, 2007, and April 15, 2008.

The European Games Developer Federation, a body representing over 500 European games developers based in Malmö, Sweden, has been instrumental in lobbying for the scheme. "We hope now, as the European Union has acknowledged the importance of our industry, that the developer community will harvest the fruits of our work and make their submissions for prototype funding," reflected EGDF general secretary **Malte Behrmann** on the success of its actions.

It's an important and welcome move for the industry, and one that, by awarding more money to game developers than any other interactive media creators, recognises the scale of producing videogames. European developers in particular are struggling to compete in a global market, as EGDF chairman Fred Hasson said in a letter to European Commission requesting further financial incentives for developers: "Europe is in danger of losing its pre-eminent position in the production of videogames due to incentives, tax breaks and massive government agency support to games industries in Canada, China and Korea if we do not act now."



Continue

German efficiency
The GC team just gets stuff done, doesn't it?

ROCK
In upper case, of course, because, well, IT IS ROCK

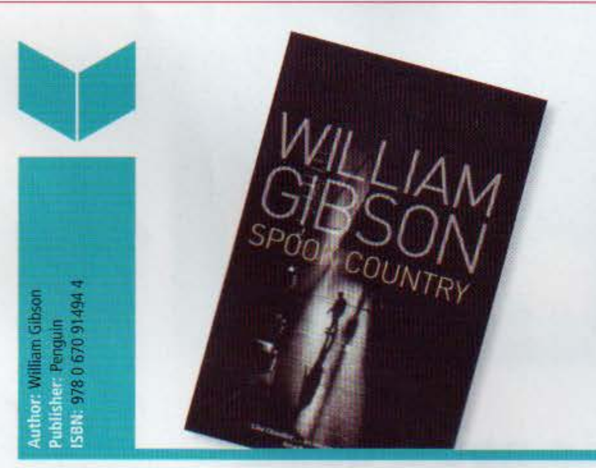
PlayStation Eye
Brings so much more to *SingStar* than you'd expect

Quit

Sixaxis motion sensing
Another month, another unconvincing example

DS on tour
So portable that no one else remembers theirs

English ineptitude
We just sit around and talk about stuff a lot, mmm?

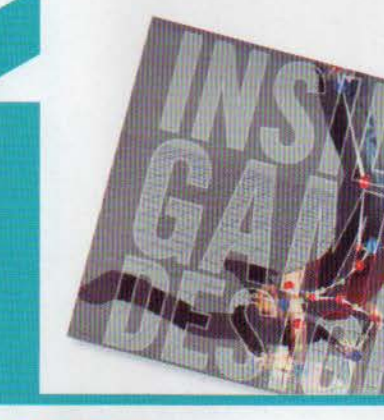


Author: William Gibson
Publisher: Penguin
ISBN: 978 0 670 91494 4

SPOOK COUNTRY

Iraqi shadows meet location-based tech in Gibson's take on 21st century spying

Considering his status as the chief technical officer of cyberpunk, it's ironic that it's only as he's flipped into a more realistic take on the world that William Gibson has entered his richest vein of writing. Just as 2003's Pattern Recognition combined the growing cultural power of the internet with the commercial murkiness of developing countries and post 9/11 paranoia, Spook Country builds on the uneasiness that underpins the American zeitgeist. As the adage goes, just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not out to get you. In the case of Spook Country however, you're unclear for the majority of the book who's out to get who, let alone the motivations of the various characters, including the ex-singer in a minor rock band, an Russian-speaking drug addict who's been kidnapped by an agency man, and a teenage Cuban black operative. Cementing the link to Pattern Recognition is mysterious Belgian billionaire Hubertus Bigend, who seems to know a lot more about what's occurring than he's letting on. But as the action flows through locative art in LA, a failed counter-espionage operation in New York and the arrival of a shipping container in Vancouver, the net closes around each character. And even if the denouement initially appears anti-climatic, that too, Gibson seems to be saying, is the way of the new world order. The most important events are those no one ever hears about. Everything in a spook country is just another shade of grey.



Author: Iain Simons
Publisher: Laurence King
ISBN: 978 1 85669 532 9

INSIDE GAME DESIGN

A cross-section of developers discuss the game-making process in this coffee-table tome

The term 'game design' is causing a lot of bother at the moment. You can spend years of your life in supposedly academic environments trying to learn about it, or trawl through shelves of books that may or may not shed some light on the subject. Either way, you'll find few opportunities to actually get your designs made, a situation that surely defeats the chance of becoming a better designer (though The Game Maker's Apprentice will help). As for Inside Game Design, it would have been more honest to call it Inside Game Development, as it's not so much about formal game design as uncovering the more woolly decision-making processes that give birth to most games. Of course, that wouldn't have sounded so definite a title. Instead, Simons, whose Difficult Questions About Videogames (E144) provided a pleasing if dense read on game culture, talks to a wide spectrum of developers, ranging from the likes of Bizarre Creations, Harmonix and Free Radical Design down to one-man mobile-game makers, as well as some of the growing number of downloadable console-game developers, about what makes them tick. There's certainly good information packed into the well-presented book, while the chirpy, anecdotal style stops the flow getting bogged down in technical jargon. Plenty of production artwork is also provided: Media Molecule in particular goes to town with *LittleBigPlanet* concepts. But while its smorgasbord approach is filling, it also lacks some structure.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



A Christmas treat for fans of – wait for it – the other real driving simulator. Forty cars, online races and a preview of GT TV join central London, Suzuka and returning Eiger Nordwand tracks

Eternity's Child

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** ALTEN8



Dropped by Microsoft due to problems meeting XBLA's size limit, the XNA platformer based on Luc Bernard's fairytale defects to Wii. At the very least, expect visuals as eccentric as their creator

Deca Sports

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** HUDSON



With any luck this'll be the next *Wii Sports* – enough, at least, to tide us over until the *next Wii Sports*. HDTV owners, beware: the volleyball, racquet and football events promise shattering finales

Race Driver: Create & Race

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS



Having veered from *TOCA*'s usual racing line, Firebrand's design-and-share game is now just around the corner. Fourplayer single-cart sharing and intuitive controls join a wealth of cars and tracks

Don Bluth DS remakes

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** CONSPIRACY ENTERTAINMENT



Following remastered Blu-ray and HD-DVD releases of the original *Dragon's Lair* come new versions of *Dragon's Lair II* and *Space Ace* on DS featuring – gulp – voice-recognition support

The Club

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Aaah, shoot. Bizarre's prize gun game slips from its Christmas release date, though no one's saying why. Perhaps Kane, Lynch, Master Chief and Chow Yun-Fat have scared it into next year

Mafia 2

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES



The prerendered trailer gives about as much away as a mob boss in the dock, full of post-Goodfellas cliché and little of the first game's old-world charm. The screenshots, however, look terrific

Silent Hill V

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



A veteran soldier recuperating in hospital? Suffering ghoulish hallucinations intercut with real-world events? Developer The Collective scampers up Jacob's Ladder in search of inspiration

Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Jill Valentine and Chris Redfield regroup for the last of these new assignments, Capcom dressing its REmake models in some fancy arctic attire. Hopefully the gameplay's been tightened since E3



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Epic Saga: Extreme Fighter

www.doublefine.com/news.php/minigames/epic-fighter

"We've been dying to talk about this game for so long," says *Psychonauts* and *Grim Fandango* creator **Tim Schafer**. "It feels great to finally be able to share it with the world." No, ho ho, not his rumoured Jack Black vehicle *Brutal Legend*, but a cheeky little Flash beat 'em up based around Double Fine artist Raz's eponymous fantasy-based comic strip. Schafer's proud of its "deep combat system" (consisting of punch and kick), and it also sports several different backdrops to fight against, and a set of selectable characters that includes a gnome, wizard, troll, barbarian and a horny witch. The 8bit-styled game also features a 'distinctive' sense of humour that will keep you battling to completion, even if it only requires furious stabbing of the kick button as the AI ambles toward you, intermittently sticking out a leg or arm in one of its four frames of animation. That's humour along the lines of the message when time is up: 'Sorry I couldn't watch you guys fight. Ever had that urge to poo but it goes away and all you do is fart a lot?' Quite.



It doesn't pay to be dysfunctional

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on Japan's growing lack of enthusiasm

Are you gaming comfortably? If you are, you might say you were 'koshi wo ochitsuite' – that's 'sitting somewhere comfortably' or 'doing something with no stress'. And perhaps you are – but I'm very far away from that.

The main reason might be personal: I just can't stay in my house! But that's because recently there just haven't been many titles with the charisma to make me stay at home and play. Looking around me, it doesn't look like many other people are playing at home either, and if I ask my friends and colleagues what they are playing, a lot of them are saying mobile games. On the PSP they're playing *Monster Hunter* and only *Monster Hunter*, on the DS it can be any title from hundreds. What if I push further, I hear you cry? Then there is a hesitant 'Mmmm…' A few might mention *FFXI*, a five-year-old MMO, and a few might mention *Oblivion*, but by far the majority are simply stuck for an answer.

When I look at the upcoming titles for the Wii, PS3 and Xbox 360, there aren't any which appeal to me, none that will make me push grandmothers to one side and step over babies simply to get to the front of the queue on the day of release. The only titles which even prick my attention are on the DS – though it has to be said that the sheer quantity of DS software available means there has to be a few good ones.

It got me thinking about recent games I've completed, devoured from the moment I tore off the cellophane to the final credits. I surprised myself again, because they're all DS titles – *Phantom Hourglass, Chibi Robo: Park Patrol, Gakuten Saiban 4* and the like. Of course I'm not saying I never play on my home consoles, and I'd agree with anyone who said that, in general, console games are improving and there's much less crap than there used to be. But there must be something we've missed, something lost along the way, because I find I just don't play the new titles as much as the old ones.

I don't know if there is an equivalent outside of Japan for this phrase, but I've recently been hearing a lot of people talking about this phenomenon in terms of 'game ED'. I'm not making this up for the sake of a column – it's now a common saying: "Lately I think I'm suffering from game ED".

The initials might seem familiar. ED – erectile dysfunction. Impotence. Shooting blanks. In this context it's not about the physical affliction, but the mental side: playing a new title doesn't create that fire in the gut, tear emotions out of you or play with your reactions, smacking your pathetic resistance into a hole and saying 'PLAY ME, WEAK HUMAN'. Many people don't even realise they're sufferers: with a very cool and critical eye they'll look at games and say: "Yeah, this game is that kind of stuff, it works like game X and has elements from game Y", etc, ad infinitum. They don't see games as something exciting, and far gone (if ever) is the time when they would deprive themselves of sleep to play just… that… little… bit… more… I even hear movie buffs suffering from something similar – celluloid ED – and wailing: "Whatever I see seems so boring".

It's when playing a new title doesn't create that fire, tear emotions out of you or play with your reactions, smacking your resistance into a hole and saying 'PLAY ME, WEAK HUMAN'. Many people don't even know they're sufferers

What's behind this, Dr Columnist? I don't really



Capcom's *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* was the best-selling videogame in Japan for the first half of 2007, but some of its hardcore fans are ignoring many other new releases

know, dear reader – it's not my area of speciality. But I'll have a bash anyway: people touched by ED seem to me mostly maniacs and heavy users. 'Normal' people who play games might try four or five titles in a year, and movie fans might see five or six films at the cinema. But the people who are clearing dozens of games every year, going to the cinema almost twice a week? Here are the ED sufferers – overdosed on rich and fatty content until they're overfed – the passive victims and the aggressive consumers, and one of the very biggest problems for the industry. From an industry point of view, it's becoming harder to appeal to these surfeited customers, and from their point of view there is an entertainment void at the centre of their life. Are they wondering what the point of all those years of gaming or cinema were?

The human race has existed for perhaps 200,000 years; it took 199,991 of those to patent Viagra. Will we have to wait as long for something to take care of the soft spongey tissue in the head to make things fresh again? Will there ever be a cure? Do we have to start from scratch? I feel kind of weary about the whole thing, and… wait. Oh, no. I've got ED! It's in my head! Someone help me! Someone find a cure, quick!

It's testament to *Phantom Hourglass*' quality that another update to a 20-year-old series has the power to challenge 'game ED'. *Chibi Robo: Park Patrol* (top), another DS title, seems to have similar properties

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Goku Makaimura Kai



Capcom must surely be composed of a bunch of sadists to make something so cruelly difficult as this. But we must be a freakish bunch of masochists to want it.
PSP, CAPCOM

Crysis



Despite not having enough time to spend with the game at Leipzig, we saw enough of its zero-gravity trickery to spin our stomachs and tickle our fancy still further.
PC, EA

Unreal Tournament 3



Though we're already engrossed in other pieces of multiplayer firstperson shooter action, it'll be interesting to see how Epic goes about shaping the genre.
PS3, MIDWAY

Open plan gaming

Are free-roaming games breaking the GTA mould?



Far Cry 2's environment is so much larger than previous efforts that it makes a key difference to the way the game plays. But how many other titles have taken open worlds in new directions?

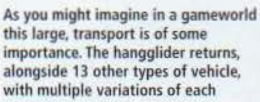
At one point, '*GTA*-style' was a common description to hang on a game. In fact, *GTA* almost became a generic term for the free-roaming non-linear game, representing the type of product rather than the brand. However, with so many upcoming titles exploring the features that defined *GTA* (and that *GTA* subsequently defined in return), we are in need of new terms to describe these games.

It is in stark contrast to the recent past, in which me-too titles like *Saints Row* did not try to play with the possibilities *GTA* had exposed, but instead moved in only small, iterative steps. Now there is a sense in which there is no longer a distinct genre of *GTA*-style games but disparate titles that use its central features of free-roaming nonlinearity to different ends.

It's hard to imagine that *Far Cry 2* will use its freedom to travel anywhere in a manner similar to *GTA*; the world is living, no doubt, and you can engage in alliances and aid others to achieve their objectives – but it is a different animal, and not simply because it's an FPS. In terms of scale it stands apart, dramatically bursting the limitations of *GTA*'s contrived island-bound cityscapes. And with this new scale come challenges to the *GTA* structure; in a landscape this huge, the process of gradual possession and control that typifies Rockstar's game is surely impossible. Kill a general here, and a colonel will step up; from what little we've seen so far, there is a greater sense of the world's persistence despite your actions that runs contrary to *GTA*-style ego trips.

Then there's *Viking*, which takes the territorial possession trope and runs, creating an enticing hybrid of persistent world, RTS and hack-and-slasher. *Borderlands*, meanwhile, adds spice to its open world with RPG elements, procedurally generated environments and the allure of co-op. More conventional games have not been extinguished, of course – both *Protoype* and *Infamous* follow the same branch of *GTA*-style construction on which *Crackdown* perches. Yet, to some extent, evolution beyond the genre is inevitable as technology enables potential not countenanced by *GTA*'s original design, or by its subsequent instalments. Which leaves us with the question of whether *GTAIV* will recognise the need to move on as well.





FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2008**

Far Cry 2

Ubisoft sets out to redeem its shooter franchise with both sprawling ambition and savannah in equal measures

As you might imagine in a gameworld this large, transport is of some importance. The hangglider returns, alongside 13 other types of vehicle, with multiple variations of each





After two years' secret development, the sequel to Crytek's free-roaming firstperson shooter has yet to reach pre-alpha. When you realise the scale of the project, you begin to appreciate why this might be. Exchanging jungle for the diverse landscape of Africa, *Far Cry 2*'s 50 square kilometres of rolling savannah, gnarled rainforest and ruddy dirt makes clear the ambition Ubisoft has for its title, dramatically outclassing previous attempts to create a truly open world.

Taking on the role of one of several mercenaries working in the region, your primary goal is to bring down an arms trafficker whose immoral trade is perpetuating a brutal conflict. Beyond this, however, the game promises to mandate very little; *Far Cry 2* attempts to create a synergy between prescribed plot and freeform structure by reconfiguring the former continually to account for your new affiliations, movements and actions. However, the progression of the player through the story superstructure was not the focus at Leipzig, instead being a presentation of the technology on which the world is grounded and the kind of action it enables.

In the half-hour of live demonstration behind closed doors, the player traversed less than one per cent of the game's total



geography. The experience was no less dense for the freedom of movement within the enormity of this environment; though it's easy to be sceptical that the final game will be as richly populated with diversions as the demonstration, the environment itself was detailed and truly, powerfully beautiful. Much effort has been expended preventing any location or vista feeling generic, and the technology that bolsters the landscape's features is clearly something of a feat. Blades of grass bend individually as the wind sweeps across them, while branches of trees wave independently of one another. Smoke and



As with *Far Cry*, stealth is an essential part of your arsenal – but, affording less cover than the dense, dark jungle, will the open grasslands of Africa demand different tactics?











The vistas offered by *Far Cry 2*'s huge and varied landscape beg for exploration. It's claimed the 50 square kilometres will be streamed seamlessly without a single loading screen



Far Cry 2 has a full day and night cycle, to which all the animals in the world will respond in the appropriate fashion. It won't quite be realtime, however, but around five times faster, so you won't be waiting long for sunset







fire are at the mercy of the wind, too, and flames will spread through the dried grasses consuming trees and wooden buildings in its path until it runs out of fuel or the wind extinguishes it. But such environmental effects are not simply generated without craft; although the game simulates weather patterns, clouds forming and dissipating credibly, the heavens will react in sympathy to the player's actions. If an ally dies in a brutal firefight, black clouds will roll across the sky, rumbling with thunder, whipped by violent winds.

The end result of this tailored, considered detailing is an environment that feels alive, and its components interact convincingly.

Smoke and fire are at the mercy of the wind, and the flames will spread through the dried grass consuming trees and wooden buildings in its path until it runs out of fuel

This applies no less to the human populace of the region, who eat when they feel hungry, sleep when they are tired, and, upon waking the next morning, will kick dirt over the embers of the previous night's fire. Such behaviour is unscripted and autonomous. Wound one of their friends, and they will try to drag them out of the line of fire. Steal a truck from them, and they will pile into the back of a jeep and give chase. Equally, help them during a firefight and they may well help you in return. The demonstration saw the player wade into a hopeless battle, and fall – apparently dead. Moments later, he was being pulled up by an ally called Marty we had visited a short while before. Apparently, having had his life saved during a previous battle, Marty heard gunfire in the area, came to investigate and decided to return the favour.

During the frenetic, vicious battles, damage is indicated by the colour and distortion of the screen and, as is becoming rapidly ubiquitous among shooters, your health recovers once you stop being shot. However, take too much damage and you receive a wound which will continue to be life-threatening until it is addressed,



Storms are something to behold – the leaves of trees and sometimes entire branches are whipped off by the wind, as the grasses beneath them bow and ripple in waves

activating one of 60 animations – the player's perspective suddenly lurching downwards as he digs the bullet out. Although these moments are presumably intended to mingle the health recharge system with something a little more visceral, the result is almost the opposite: they are instead a little incongruous and draw more attention to the artificiality of health in shooters than is perhaps sensible.

With a good deal of time left in development, however, there is undoubtedly much that will change. Nonetheless, the foundation here is startlingly comprehensive – the crafting of the world is unquestionably sound, and although the manner in which the player progresses within it has yet to be proved, Ubisoft's efforts with AI and the ally system confirm an ambition that was absent from the various spin-offs of the game's predecessor. The next year will see a good number of sandbox shooters come to market but it's clear that Ubisoft wants to re-establish *Far Cry*'s credibility as one of the genre's leading brands, expanding the horizons of the open world.

Happiness is a warm gun

Unfortunately a very, very warm gun may not be of much use at all. The 30 or so weapons that you'll find in *Far Cry 2* won't always be reliable in the hot and dusty conditions, and you may find that they jam or misfire. The arsenal has been given a few other neat details, too – the RPG launcher's projectile, for example, doesn't become armed until it has rotated four times, meaning that shells can be bounced so long as you get the timing right.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2008**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E164**

Spore

EA takes us through a slice of life in Will Wright's god sim



The way evolution is represented in the game lends itself to a gentle learning curve as your creatures gain complexity. But it has perhaps exchanged depth and challenge for freedom – there seem to be few penalties for bad design







Ushering life from primordial soup to intergalactic colonisation: the ambitious scope of *Spore* is enough to generate a great deal of good will. It's easy to feel excited by the potential diversity of play offered by the game's five distinct sections – survival at the cellular level; exploration as a larger, land-dwelling creature; creation and expansion of a tribe; diplomacy and war as a civilisation; and, finally, space travel and terraforming of new worlds. Equally, such scope gives pause: could it not easily be that this diversity comes at the expense of depth? Will *Spore* really amount to the sum of its parts?

It has to be said that the hands-off demonstration at Leipzig didn't wholly allay these concerns. Featuring only the second and third sections of the game, the accelerated playthrough didn't quite manage to generate an interest in the world and your creatures' interaction with it. But there is still a great deal to admire besides. The editing tools that allow you to sculpt your own beast are a triumph of accessibility, for instance, tugging spines into curves or crooks with a few sweeps of the mouse – a couple of clicks moulding flabby bulbs and long elegant limbs, reshaping skulls and jaws, and appending forearms with deadly claws. Colourisation, meanwhile, although more clearly based upon preset patterns, allows you to layer the designs in such a way that the eventual skin tones look distinctive.

If nothing else, then, *Spore* looks to be a delightful tool for expressing player creativity, and, dropping the resulting animal into the world, it's clear that the game makes good on its early promises: no matter how strange the arrangement of limbs and joints of your creature, it will be animated appropriately. Further, the form of your animal will directly affect its abilities; mouth-shape determines whether or not it can eat meat, and the construction of limbs alters its chances in combat and social possibilities. But just how rich and significant a range of options arise from this is unclear – the interactions were very limited in the demo, allowing you to only either bite or sing, and the effect of further upgrades were not in evidence.

While there is an obvious joy in having your creations roam the world, the demonstration didn't really convince that what it was then possible to do with those creations was particularly interesting. As a recent arrival on to land, the second section of the game involves wandering a fairly featureless environment, acquiring 'DNA points' by killing or befriending other creatures in your immediate vicinity. Neither of these activities were hugely appealing – combat, aside from lacking a feeling of tangible connection, is largely out of the player's hands, and attempts to wow other creatures seem arbitrarily successful. It all contributes to the disturbing feeling that Maxis hasn't quite worked out what this part of the game is for, except to bridge the gap between the cellular and tribal states.

Eventually you can mate, and then spend your DNA points purchasing new parts for your creature. Later still, having

The form of your animal will directly affect its abilities; mouth-shape determines whether or not it can eat meat, and the construction of limbs alters its chances in combat





The vibrancy of *Spore*'s world still appeals, but on closer inspection it all feels a little lacking in features, a disappointing result of the compromise between detail and making *Spore* playable on low-end systems







The tribe section has a few activities to which you can assign your creatures, and you can create different colour patterns and clothing for each of these specific roles



Touched by His noodly appendage

There has been some commentary on *Spore*'s presentation of evolution and its position in the lopsided debate over intelligent design. It's more than a little misleading, however: here, the design of your creature and its trappings are almost irrelevant to gameplay. Initially, you get an extra attack move for each tusk or extra limb, but, as the range of possible creatures testifies, the creativity possible is design largely without purpose: it's almost wholly aesthetic and hardly a representation of either intelligent design or Darwinian evolution.



Spore is a game about the joy of creation rather than design; the variety of architectural styles you can explore are of aesthetic value rather than functionally different. The opportunity to swap creations with other players is alluring, however

befriended three different animals, you achieve intelligence and enter the third section of the game – the occasion heralded by a parody of 2001: A Space Odyssey in which your creature triumphantly bashes something with a stick to the tune of Also Sprach Zarathustra. The genre remit for this section is better defined than its predecessor, essentially functioning like an RTS, in which you collect resources, build and upgrade your village's facilities, and conquer or recruit other tribes. And there are some neat touches – you can determine the clothing your creatures wear during certain activities, for example, making group identification and selection easier.

Once again, however, the range of your possible interactions seems a little limited – although time constraints undoubtedly restricted the focus of the demonstration. We saw some tribe members fishing, fighting and dancing – this last in an attempt to coax another tribe into joining them. Presumably there are further roles, but whether the organisation of these will provide an interesting challenge is the real question, and one that was not definitively answered by the presentation.

It is a worry that, in trying to cover so many different gametypes, the promise of each will be reduced. *Spore*'s central and ingeniously implemented selling point is the editor which enables the creation of so much in its world – but if this world is then only periodically engaging in its behaviour, Maxis may have created a briefly brilliant toy rather than a enduringly entertaining game.



You can impress other tribes with your musical skills. If they begin tapping their feet you can convince them to join your tribe, changing their colour in the process

Interestingly, progression is largely item-based. With cabalists, for example, high-level spells are not as important as the high-level 'focus items' used to empower them







Playing as a marksman rids you of auto-aim, meaning that you can manually pick targets other classes cannot – taking out the shaman standing behind his minions

Hellgate: London

As ever, commuting proves to be a diabolical nightmare as we navigate a nightmarish version of the West End



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **FLAGSHIP STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 2**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164, E172**

In Bill Roper's futuristic fantasy version of the Big Smoke, it is the London Underground where the last vestiges of humanity have holed up – a rather flattering end to the British transport system which is, in reality, a hole in which most people lose the last vestiges of their humanity. In fact, apart from the spattering of names and locations, little of London is recognisable here – the geography has been broken up into fragments which continually reconfigure themselves, meaning that each journey between static hubs will be a unique, randomised experience. It is in this sense that Flagship's RPG is a spiritual successor to the *Diablo* series which Roper championed while at Blizzard. But it's clear that *Hellgate* goes far beyond this, providing more variety than alternate flavours of dungeon.

During our demonstration, Roper picks up a mission in Charing Cross tube station, which obliges him to head through Whitehall and down to the riverbed of the Thames, where a battle rages. The quest entails a specific end encounter, and so this meeting will always take place in a similar location – although its exact layout will be vastly altered each time. The locations between Charing Cross and that point, however, are much more subject to change. Heading through Whitehall you might find yourself either below or above ground in any of 50 to 60 different types of location – Victorian sewers, the disused Tube network, back alleys, deserted streets and so on. These will be made further distinct by 'rarity' – the example that Roper gives is that you might in one instance find that the sky is red and that all of the daemons are on fire. Then there are randomised mission encounters; you might come across a wounded man who begs you to find and help his friends. It seems that Flagship Studios has attempted to use randomisation to its best effect, creating an intense and idiosyncratic experience.

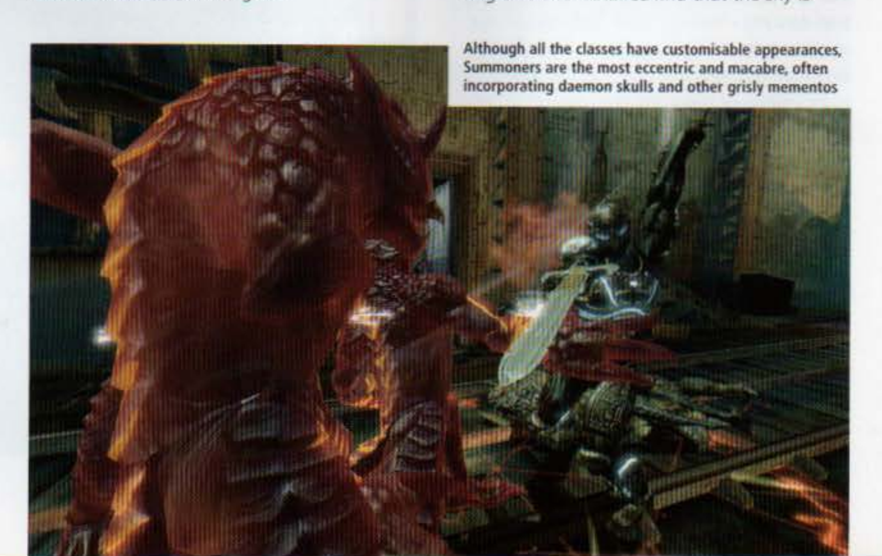
With around 200 quests available to the player, *Hellgate* promises between 30 and 45 hours of roleplaying out of the box. On top of this is the opportunity to take the game online, at no extra cost, interacting co-operatively with thousands of other players. An additional subscription model is available for £7 per month which gives access to extra content – armour, classes, skills, quests and extra character slots. It's certainly an interesting payment model, taking advantage of the attractive immediacy and permanence of a single upfront fee, but then allowing for a smoother approach to the additional content pipeline – releasing material as and when.

The optional subscription is just one of several ways in which *Hellgate* generously caters for player individuality – characters look to be heavily customisable from the offset, and the choice of classes offers a radical variety which borrows from shooters and more traditional RPGs alike (see 'A touch of class'). Although the idea of a *WOW* killer is something of a fallacy, *Hellgate*'s considered combination of diversity, flexibility and depth looks set to play well among a very broad audience.

A touch of class

***Hellgate* features three 'esoteric depictions of philosophical archetypes', according to Roper. Each of these groups – Templars, Cabalists and Hunters – then break down into two further classes, the total range offering dramatically different styles of play. Templars, conceived as medieval crusaders realised with modern technology, are melee experts, with an offensive or defensive bias. Cabalists are magicians – summoning daemons or using spells. Hunters play closer to the FPS mould – gun-toting marksmen, or engineers capable of building mechanical allies.**

Although all the classes have customisable appearances, Summoners are the most eccentric and macabre, often incorporating daemon skulls and other grisly mementos









Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

IO Interactive's crime shooter proves you are never too old for vicious, uncompromising revenge

Kane and Lynch may be destined to take a place among gaming's most memorably realised characters. Kane, coldly calculating, broken and embittered, is an anti-hero on a very human scale – a criminal of a generation slowly falling into obsolescence. The unstable Lynch, meanwhile, despite a brutish appearance, is perhaps more sympathetic – a man whose sudden violence is a result of paranoid schizophrenia, an illness that makes him simultaneously vulnerable and frighteningly unpredictable. But it's their interaction that defines them – alternately uneasy in their alliance and then downright antagonistic.

Promisingly, these characters have not simply been dropped into a predefined shooter in order to give it colour – it is around this relationship that the game is built, the gunplay driven by the scenarios which the men face together rather than the levels being designed to fulfil a certain feature set. As such, the game's variety of challenges unfold with a natural and cinematic sense of progression. Indeed, with a movie scheduled for release in 2009, cinema is clearly something of a preoccupation, and it's no surprise that the game has absorbed a good deal material from crime films, echoing the likes of Heat, Get Carter and Point Blank.

In this latest demonstration we witness the dramatic opening level, in which Kane and Lynch make their escape from the security truck transporting them to their execution, as well as revisit the previously seen sequences involving a nightclub and a heist-cum-shootout on Tokyo streets. The latter two levels have changed little from the last time we saw them, although some minor glitches have been eradicated, but this time the demonstration is more complete, and gives a better sense of how the game functions as a shooter.

One note of particular interest is the developer's emphasis on not being punitive – if Kane goes down, he will be revived by a colleague, giving him a shot of adrenaline and pulling him to his feet. Two shots of adrenaline in rapid succession may cause him to overdose – but lenient checkpoints ensure you never have to retread a lot of ground.

The action is loosely tactical, allowing you to command your men in a general direction, and necessitating the use of cover and smoke grenades to give you the upper hand.

Hopefully *Kane & Lynch* will maintain the pace and level of engagement we've witnessed so far, blending it convincingly with the odd-couple dramatics of its central characters. When so many other franchises plump for protagonists that are little more than a jumble of insipid clichés, IO should be recognised for trying something different in pushing and promoting these dark, grizzled and imperfect leads.





As in *Stranglehold*, gunfights become more dynamic when you find your cover being steadily blown apart, forcing you to move on and find shelter elsewhere







If Lynch hasn't been taking his pills he can be more than a little twitchy; if things really get too much he may not be able to tell the difference between cops and civilians

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 16**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E167**



Ugly stick

Although *Kane & Lynch* draws bold lines with its characters and intentions, when placed beside so many other demos at the Leipzig Games Convention it's clear just how rapid the graphical advancement of this generation has been. Although admittedly not yet complete, *Kane & Lynch* looks a little rough by comparison – no surface seems to feature detailed textures, crowds are made up of identical models, and sequences frequently venture into the Uncanny Valley. That said, each level is ambitious in scale and heavily populated, possibly making detail a luxury.



The clubbers here, as in real life, may all look a little similar, but according to the dev team there are between 3,000 and 3,500 of them in this building alone





The game's use of the analogue stick to swing items is an ingenious and intuitive merging of combat and functional control schemes. We suspect that the PC equivalent may end up involving circular manoeuvrings of the mouse



Burning items will eventually break and you can hold them for only so long before the flames begin to scorch your hands. It's a realistic trade-off between their combat effectiveness and longevity

Alone In The Dark

Eden reveals some promising technology at Leipzig, but where's the game to use it?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Since last year's E3, Eden has remained unforthcoming about this gloomy remake of the 1992 classic – a game which gave birth to many of the identifiable features of the survival-horror genre. We know that it has relocated to Central Park, New York, and that it will be episodic in its structure – broken up into one-hour segments of action, much like a TV show. Beyond this, little is known, however. Given that the project has two years of development behind it, we were slightly nonplussed that all we were shown at Leipzig was a tech demo featuring a walkthrough of the kind of puzzles you might face during the actual game, should it ever decide to step out from the shadows. Fortunately, this modest demonstration was by itself pretty compelling, convincing us that the game has potential to deliver both atmosphere and innovation.

In the spirit of the original game, your character will find few weapons to hand – relying on a mixture of makeshift tools and his environment to defeat or avoid his enemies. The technology bolstering this is the ability to combine many items that you come across – the inventory system displaying from a firstperson perspective, looking down over the character's chest as he opens his jacket, revealing the many pockets inside. Wrap a glowstick in tape and you can fling it on to a wall to light the area ahead of you. Fill a bottle with bullets and gasoline and you have a bomb, which you can then ignite from a safe distance by leaving a trail of fuel.

In fact, fire seemed to be a central theme of the demo, and one of the most effective ways to dispense with enemies. As with *Far Cry 2*, fire spreads realistically, consuming flammable substances and, indeed, flammable creatures – which includes you if you're unlucky enough not to have a fire extinguisher to hand. From these simple abilities arise complex mechanics; the demonstration suggested multiple ways to resolve an encounter with some small, gruesome looking enemies – apparently some sort of demonically mutated vermin. Our character at first shoots a corpse to distract the creatures, which choose to feast on the blood rather than attack the player. He then wraps a bottle of gasoline in tape and manages to throw it on to one of the creatures, to which it sticks, before igniting it with a bullet. The player then punctures a hole in a blood pack, and uses the trail to lure the remaining enemies into a gasoline-soaked fire trap.

In keeping with the attention to physics, handling items has been made intuitive and realistic. The player picks up a chair, and, with a slow rotation of the 360 controller's right analogue stick, the character moves the item in a circle, sweeping out in front of him and then up over his head. With swift movements, items can be swung violently to serve as bludgeons – we witnessed a metal door being steadily deformed as it was beaten with a fire extinguisher, before finally breaking from its hinges. Later, a pipe was articulated through the air to coax an electrical wire out from a pool of water.

In an ideal world the full game will put these powerful, simple mechanics to good use in creating ingenious puzzles, which, being constructed on realistic principles, will make the game's horror element all the more credible. However, with so much time on the project already expended, we can only hope that the handful of months between now and the scheduled release date shed some light on an actual game which does justice to its foundations.



HP source

Alone In The Dark **has a strong heritage (putting aside the infamous film by Uwe Boll). The original was among the first games to use 3D character models, and its non-linearity, avoidance of combat and pervading sinister air made it a template to which many other series, including** ***Resident Evil*** **and** ***Silent Hill,*** **owe a debt. Subsequent games dropped the references to the Cthulhu mythos that inspired the original, ill-advisedly leading the series down rather less cogent routes, involving Mafioso pirates and zombie cowboys. Hopefully this remake returns, if not to the tales of Lovecraft, then to a more coherent and uniformly terrifying premise.**



The Belvedere Hotel serves as one of the foreboding locales in *Alone In The Dark*, along with the whole of Central Park, which has been recreated to within 50cm of reality

Nights: Journey Of Dreams

Sega gives the formula behind a Saturn classic another whirl – this time via the swishes and swoops of a Wii Remote

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E178**

Many have fond memories of Nights' previous adventures – a fact which is both a boon and a burden for Sega's US studio, which is developing this sequel under the watchful eye of original designer Takashi Iizuka. However, a recent eyes-only demonstration suggests that *Journey Of Dreams* remains faithful to the original, almost note for note, despite a new control scheme on the Wii hardware.

Once again you control the androgynous flying jester, Nights, swooping through the vibrant dreamscapes of Nitghtopia, on a mission to rid the land of the monstrous Nightmaren who plague children's sleep. As before, the movement space is restricted to a two-dimensional course that weaves back and forth and around a three-dimensional environment. Within these limits, Nights spins and soars, collecting items and performing tricks that extend the countdown of his flight time.


With such a long period having elapsed between this and the last *Nights* game, *Journey Of Dreams* will inevitably have to appeal to a new audience as well as fans. Being used to freely navigable 3D environments, will younger gamers be enamoured by Nights' restricted flightpath?

Whereas the previous *Nights* was a score-attack game, interspersed by boss battles, *Journey Of Dreams* introduces specific objectives, too. During the level we saw demonstrated, Nights had to chase a bird in order to prise a key from its claws – presumably to open one of the doors that lead to other dreamscapes. Interestingly, the emphasis on the game's challenges seems to have shifted slightly: when Nights' flight time came to an end, you traditionally dropped out of the sky and had to waddle back to a central point in order to re-initiate the level – a task made difficult by bouncing egg-timers which would pursue you. This threat seems to have been eliminated and, instead, the level ends and you return to a hub world.



Certainly, *Journey Of Dreams* remains true to the style of the original game as well as Sega's trademark vivid palette, and – minor tweaks aside – indications are that it will deliver more of the same.

Perhaps fans would suggest, though, that innovation is not as important as ensuring that the central joy of continuous, aerobatic motion remains intact.


The levels are realised with the usual Sega-bright colours, and the boldness of the art style helps to distract from the fact that it doesn't come close to the graphical standards set by *Mario Galaxy*

Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games

With the acrid smell of the 2012 logo furore still lingering, we brace ourselves as the Olympic marketing machine unleashes the inevitable slew of 2008-branded games



FORMAT: **DS, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **CHRISTMAS**

While the pairing of Mario and Sonic has long been in the minds of gamers, whose partisanship in the console wars of the 1990s has since faded into nostalgia, the occasion to bring them together here sounds less like fan appeasement and more like an attempt to elevate a trite cash-in. With a hefty number of similarly themed games coming to market, Sega will certainly need the combined star power of the game's contenders: also on the horizon is an Asterix-branded Olympics game, plus Konami's remake of *Track & Field* (the original was re-released in August on Live Arcade), in which you can play as *Silent Hill*'s Pyramid Head, among other Konami icons.

Such branding emphasis portends that it will be difficult to distinguish the games qualitatively, and a brief demonstration of Mario and Sonic's sprinting and hurdle events confirmed them to be predictably implemented. The archery event, however, sparked hope that some of the tasks would be more mechanically interesting – requiring you to pull the Remote back, trigger down, in a line behind the Nunchuk.

However, when Wii games have so regularly explored new control methods and then tied them to wider and more interesting objectives, there's a high risk that the single Olympic events will feel reductive by comparison. The same could be said of party games which often rely on single, simple control schemes for each activity, but *WarioWare* and its ilk also bombard and befuddle the player with rapid changes and bizarre images. There's an anarchic humour to those games which will inevitably be absent from this, a game about a fairly rigidly defined sporting event, albeit one in which the participants are juxtaposed from notable videogame franchises.

Hopefully Sega has thought about the ways it can make this treatment distinct from the slew of other Olympics games jostling for contention. If it simply relies on the appeal of its contestants to add gloss to a by-the-numbers Remote-jiggler then it may well fall at the first hurdle.


Each character has different skill biases. Mario is the all-rounder; Bowser has brute strength; Sonic, as you might imagine, is speedy – but in a token effort to balance things, he accelerates slowly. He still seemed to win each race event, though




Princess Peach's pink blancmange isn't practical sportswear. As in *Mario Strikers* she's one of the few whose iconic apparel is altered to suit the context





Combat is not merely button mashing: by delivering a series of fast attacks against enemies you amass pips that can then be spent on large, spectacularly bloody moves



Viking: Battle For Asgard

Creative Assembly drinks deeply from the skull of Scandinavian myth

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

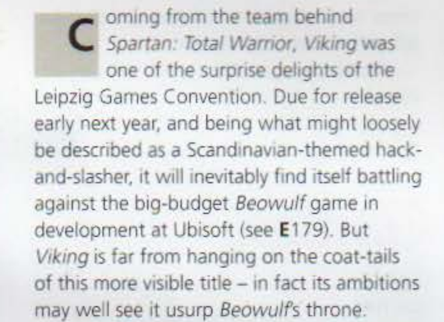
Coming from the team behind *Spartan: Total Warrior*, *Viking* was one of the surprise delights of the Leipzig Games Convention. Due for release early next year, and being what might loosely be described as a Scandinavian-themed hack-and-slasher, it will inevitably find itself battling against the big-budget *Beowulf* game in development at Ubisoft (see **E**179). But *Viking* is far from hanging on the coat-tails of this more visible title – in fact its ambitions may well see it usurp *Beowulf's* throne.

In both games you control a hulking mass of Nordic muscle as he cuts a bloody channel through a throng of gruesome enemies – and in both games your actions have an impact on the allied troops who fight alongside you. At this point the divergent scale of the two titles becomes apparent – *Beowulf's* squad behaviour is important in an immediate, linear fashion; in *Viking*, your actions as a bulwark are a tactical necessity to shape the course of vast battles occurring in an open world.

Taking place on a square kilometre of remarkably well-drawn island, *Viking* sees you slowly liberate settlements from the undead hordes of the vengeful goddess, Hel. As you do so, you can call a greater number of troops to your aid in later battles. Such events unfold in a non-linear fashion – indeed, you are free to explore the island and visit enemy encampments at any point in the game and, although it would be unwise to engage them in battle before you are suitably prepared, you might instead elect to sneak in alone and sabotage key utilities that will weaken their defences during a later confrontation. Similarly, you can bolster your own army's chances by a strategic selection of targets: liberate key resources, such as a lumber mill, and you'll find your army equipped with a battering ram.

Individual battles also feature a strategic flow; your abilities are a vital asset to your army, and you must consider where and whom you engage in combat. Your presence has such an effect that you can successfully push a contingent of thanes through heavy defences or, by infiltration and assassination, you can remove the enemy shaman responsible for respawning the forces that are stymying your troops' advance. Such actions need to be thought through – drive your troops into a dangerous chokepoint without first dealing with the defences and you'll find your army in dire straits.

This scaling, from the brutal one-on-one combat, through the tactics of each battle, to the strategy of an all-encompassing war, is ambitious – and much rests on how fluidly the convergence of these layers of gameplay will prove. However, the demonstration suggested that its breadth hasn't come at the expense of the completeness of each element. Combat is a system of moves and abilities that chain together, building up to special attacks and magic. The results are suitably brutal but not without challenge – cleaving minor enemies into gory slabs is a doddle, but finishing off a champion requires carefully parrying and avoiding attacks until a vulnerable moment allows you to leap up and piledrive a sword through the back of his neck. If this small-scale violence segues well into tactical and strategic warfare – as the developer's *Total War* heritage suggests it will – then *Viking* has a good chance of bringing to the hack-and-slash genre a level of depth so far unseen.





Game for Olaf

Although *Viking* eschews the historical realism of the *Total War* series in favour of a fantasy setting, Creative Assembly has emphasised its authenticity within Scandinavian myth. The game sees you take on the role of Skarin, who is chosen to see off the forces of Hel, a goddess who throws a strop at being expelled from Asgard, conquers Midgard, and tries to release Fenris to bring about Ragnorok. Although the dev team has promised that Hel will be a tragic figure, with so much else going on in the game, will there really be much space for storytelling?



Currently in pre-alpha, the game already looks good, and although its world is nowhere near as large as that of *Far Cry 2*, its single square kilometre of dense island scenery offers plenty of pretty diversions, perfectly decent draw distances, and lots of freedom to roam



You need to manage your time and abilities to help your troops – grunt individualism without tactical thinking will just lead to you confronting insurmountable odds alone

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **LIQUID ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2008**

Rise Of The Argonauts

In a lightning-quick presentation, this myth-inspired RPG hacks through the accepted features of the genre

Though *Rise Of The Argonauts* claims to be an RPG, you might not have known it from the demonstration at Leipzig, which seemed to focus all of its 15 minutes on the ways in which the game upsets clichés and deviates from the norm.

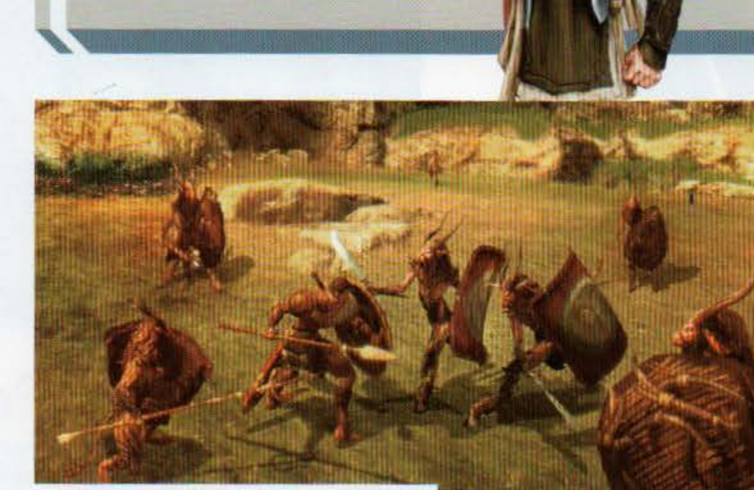
Although it's clear that we take on the role of Greek hero Jason, the demonstration didn't dwell upon the formation of story, stating simply that there is one, and that it is as rich as you would expect from an RPG. Instead, the presentation examined the combat elements of the game and, if your pen could move fast enough to take note of them, there were many minor, but nonetheless pleasing, touches that built towards an emphasis on delivering instant, visceral action.

Rejecting the usual statistics trade-off, enemies die in a single hit if they don't block or dodge your sweeping blade – often falling into two bloody halves. But block and dodge they do, exhibiting levels of intelligence, and the dev team made a point of the fact that enemies attack together, rather than falling back on the game cliché of advancing one by one to their death. Levelling up here has palpable effects – your enemies don't simply take more damage; a higher level is the difference between knocking a foe back with your shield, and swatting him off his feet.

All these efforts were well complemented by a dynamic animation system, assessing where an enemy is in relation to your character, and ensuring that each attack move then connects convincingly. For a game given so little time to impress the press, *Argonauts* did a good job of piquing interest with its smattering of innovations and irreverence for the genre.

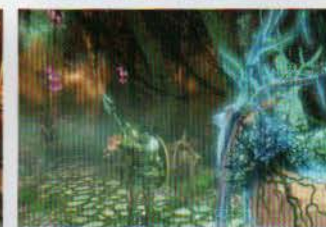


Jason can choose two Argonauts to join him on his missions, selecting from a range of well-known figures from Greek myth, including Hercules, Atlanta and Achilles



Bored of seeing the same animations again and again, the dev team has created unique attacks depending on the target – not just finishing moves, à la *God Of War*





Speedball 2

The Bitmap Brothers pass the ball on to Kylotonn for this remake

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FROGSTER**
DEVELOPER: **KYLOTONN**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe was one of the flagship titles of British game development, its unabashed violence and humour marking out The Bitmap Brothers as a studio at the vanguard of the UK's talent. Its recent re-release on Xbox Live Arcade, with an ill-advised (although blessedly optional) graphical revision, showed that the game's charms had only slightly diminished over the intervening years – *Speedball 2* endures as an anarchic, if lightweight, piece of arcade-style action.

But, given the original's presence on Live, perhaps this full remake from French team Kylotonn seems a little premature, not to mention confusingly titled – dropping the subtitle but keeping the same numeration. Indeed, all of the game's features are faithfully reproduced with almost no alteration; it's easy to think that there is little to justify a full-priced version of a game that is already readily available, in appealing lo-res glory, for considerably less.

However, aside from a dubious conversion to 3D, the upcoming remake brings the kind of online support that should be a model for any developer. The game comes with extensive community facilities, matchmaking and ranking systems, and even a full SDK, with which the developer hopes players will customise every aspect of the game and create a healthy flow of user-generated content. While the game itself is a modest diversion, the way Kylotonn has supplemented this with generous peripheral features might well appeal strongly to the *Speedball* series' cult following.





Player classes have been introduced: accurate cyborgs, intelligent women and aggressive men. Oddly, the AI is the same as that used in *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*





The standard camera sways and bobs more actively than before, although not as severely as that of *Skate*. Tighter direction can be achieved in the video-editor mode, as can the application of visual filters and music



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground

Still pushing, tweaking, updating, evolving and refining. Is Hawk down to the last of his nine lives?

Sitting down to play *Proving Ground*, it's all too easy to mumble a well-worn grumble about once again hitting the streets with extreme sports gaming's own answer to Mario, a well-flogged, high-jumping icon with enough multi-generational heritage to rival many RPGs. But it's just as easy to once again get sucked into this combo-driven institution; *Proving Ground*'s presence may make observers roll their eyes, but old hands will soon be rolling their tongues and thumbs with concentration, eagerly familiarising themselves with the game's new trick aspects and falling for its flexibility all over again.

Every new *Tony Hawk* game brings new things, but *Proving Ground* is the first to truly feel feature-complete – there are no obvious holes in its bullet points – along with a certain sense of maturity about its advancement. The long-established balance bars, formerly a stumpy meter that would appear right next to your skater during grind and manual manoeuvres, has been replaced with a colour-coded, screen-wide arc. The logic? It frees up your eyes while you're maintaining your balance tricks, instead of having to focus on the centre of the screen and leaving navigation to peripheral vision.

It's the extension to *Project 8*'s revivifying Nail the Trick mode that's the sharpest new hook, however. Its series of foot-fancy flip tricks now extends to include Nail the Grab and Nail the Manual, allowing this slick slow-mo mode to become a combo string in itself, and not just part of one. During Nail the Trick mode, holding the left trigger activates the grab-move aspect, where the sticks dictate where each hand grasps the board; the manual aspect needs the right trigger to be held, with each stick determining the height of each foot. While these new analogue avenues successfully add further bulk to the series' already-groaning trick repertoire, they don't feel like a significant overlap with the intimate control mechanisms of EA's *Skate* (see p92). Both it and *Proving Ground* offer a technical approach to skating, but EA's debut is about stretching the joypad over skateboarding, while Neversoft's long-serving endeavour is about stretching skateboarding over the joypad. Visually, however, *Proving Ground*'s ashen realism may well differentiate it from previous titles, but has placed it more in line with the competition. A little more colour would be very welcome, and would hardly harm the game's ostentatious style.

As with *Project 8*, there's renewed reason for faithful *Hawk* players to consider once again upping pads and getting stuck in. But it's the game's as-yet-unknown ability to tie together its new features via plot, objectives and its character-class system that will be crucial in convincing *Pro Skater 2 & 3* romantics that *Proving Ground* is a more confident slice of expansion than has been typical over the years.



Little big plan-it

Each of *Proving Ground*'s three districts – based on Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington DC – can host up to 30 pieces of player-placed Rigger kit, and permanently so. Phone booths allow you to call friends into seamless online play, as they'll be invited into your modded vision of the gameworld. Your personal HQ is a hangar-sized area that can hold up to 200 pieces of furniture, including wall-hugging screens that can roll a selection of videos. These personal hubs can also be decked out with themed decor kits including chrome, dojo and skate-park themes.

Passers-by who view your tricks (below) will add a little bonus to your cash bank, which is also bolstered by online play. Barge into a ped (right), however, and you can expect them to give surprisingly dedicated chase







The aggro push, when applied with timing, allows you to build up extra speed during an approach to a ramp, without needing to find a clear and lengthy run-up. You can also boost yourself off walls and vehicles during a manual





Nearly 60 licensed music tracks are confirmed, in a typically broad sweep, including The Rolling Stones, Oasis, The Clash, Beastie Boys, Bloc Party and Jurassic 5. The 360 version will also feature a *Guitar Hero III* demo

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE-TWO**
DEVELOPER: **GEARBOX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2008**

Borderlands

Brothers In Arms developer Gearbox exchanges World War II for the grit and dirt of the interplanetary frontier

Given the success of Pitch Black and Firefly, it's slightly surprising that the 'wild west in space' genre has seen little goldrush fever. Swaggering into this niche is *Borderlands*, an RPG-flavoured FPS set on the planet of Pandora, the site of a poorly conceived colonisation attempt. As those who named it apparently foresaw, Pandora contains some rather ghastly things, which only reveal themselves when the incredibly slow seasonal cycle of the planet kicks into spring.

With their new home rapidly becoming less hospitable, many colonists up and leave – but seven settlements remain, determined to eke out a living on the frontier. You find yourself playing as a fortune hunter and gun for hire, tasked with protecting the citizens of New Haven from the flying creatures which threaten their livelihood.

As with several of the more ambitious titles on show at Leipzig, *Borderlands* features an open world – free to explore and partly procedurally generated. The game has also been built with co-op in mind. Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox, gave us a typically well-rehearsed presentation, periodically whooping with practised enthusiasm and showing a lively sequence in which the players were being pursued across salt flats by a group of buggy-driving marauders. Landing a grenade under the wheels of their enemy, the two co-op players switched positions in their own vehicle, their character models clambering over its chassis to get into position.

No doubt *Borderlands* has some neat tricks hidden under its dust-jacket, but it could find itself outgunned by id's similarly sun-baked sci-fi vehicular FPS, *Rage*. Perhaps the genre will turn out to be big enough for the both of them.

Vehicles and weapons are highly customisable, with the latter being randomly generated within certain parameters to create over 500,000 possible items







As well as dangerous indigenous species, you'll find yourself up against human opponents who have taken advantage of the lawless fringes of civilisation



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **A2M**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2008**

Wet

A2M brings grit, style and wiggling hips to the thirdperson actioner

Unveiled for the first time at Leipzig, the rather strangely titled *Wet* introduces Rubi, a leather-clad gun-toting fixer who lives in an abandoned plane graveyard and has a penchant for balletic combat. As a female gaming icon she is a reasonably characterful effort – a coolly nonchalant ninja falling somewhere between the comic-book touchstones of tough femininity, Miho and Tank Girl. She also sets a new standard in animation simply for the remarkable, and probably physically impossible, gyration of her buttocks as she walks – perhaps an acknowledgement that Lara Croft has the exaggeration of other feminine attributes already covered.

The action on show saw Rubi swing from rafters, vault across tables, perform wall-runs and flips, diving and rolling with grace – gunning down enemies all the while. The game allows you to lock on to multiple targets at once, although not with the freedom explored in the recent *Call Of Juarez*, and during any of her acrobatic 'navigation moves', Rubi can whip out a katana for a grimly amusing sword kill.



Rubi's animation stays fluid despite the unorthodox combinations of movements that you can execute





Apparently the work of sometime 24 writer Duppy Demetrius, the storyline promises plenty of double-crossing and intrigue to frame the thirdperson action

There's no doubt that *Wet* has attitude and a certain amount of flair – its slick visual design is pitched with accuracy at the exact median point between Quentin Tarantino, Guy Ritchie and Tony Scott. The risk is that Rubi will look like a bit of a Jenny-come-lately, offering the exact same kind of gunplay already seen in titles such as *Stranglehold* – but even then it's hard to begrudge *Wet*'s wit and beautiful, compelling carnage.





Exploration is incentivised by hidden ancient artefacts which give you significant bonuses, working in much the same way as the Wonders of the World in previous *Civs*. The Arc of the Covenant, for instance, instantly provides all of your cities with a temple

Civilization: Revolution

The long-revered PC strategy series gets a lithesome reinvention for the console market

FORMAT: **360, DS, PS3, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE-TWO**
DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2008, AUTUMN 2008 (Wii)**

Sid Meier's name appears above many games: *Sid Meier's Pirates*, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* and even *Sid Meier's SimGolf* (try saying that five times quickly). But one game, or perhaps one concept, looms over them all: *Civilization*. From its 1991 release it has been the game synonymous with his career and, as one of the defining titles of strategy gaming, it is largely responsible for cementing the association between the PC and that particular genre. With *Civilization: Revolution*, Meier hopes to upturn this relationship.

To wit, *Revolution* streamlines much of the traditional design – though in this rare case it seems that 'streamline' isn't a euphemism for 'dumb down'. Its success comes down to delivering information efficiently. "I think we want an experience that is immediately easier to understand than mouseovers and text readouts, as well as being visually dramatic," says Meier. "There's a practical value in a real causative relationship and visual feedback there – I want to make a game that you'll be able to figure out what's happening by looking at it rather than running for the manual or looking for tips online."

Upgraded units, city resources and fortifications are all realised visually – making it much easier to calculate the success of any encounter with enemy troops, their various modifiers easily visible at a glance. While the game remains turn-based, it promises to be a great deal faster. Although Meier says he sees little difference in the attention span of PC and console gamers, by virtue of being on a console, *Revolution* has a greater multiplayer focus, and this determines the game's pace: "It's maybe OK for you to play alone for half a day, but hard to find a group of people who'll sit down for ten hours."

This accessibility doesn't undermine the rich and involving gameplay the series is known for, Meier insists: "I don't buy that long games are deeper – making a decision 20 times rather than two, that's not deeper."

The eventual goal of the game is still to send an expedition all the way to Alpha Centauri, although you can also win by conquering all other capital cities. Alternatively, you can win the game by more peaceful methods: achieving cultural or economic hegemony

While the game progresses at a faster pace, there are few areas which seem to lack the detail of *Civs* past. The technology tree remains intact, although the brilliant interface design makes its comprehension considerably less cumbersome than in previous games. The city screen is similarly complete, although its revised interface makes management of your populace and resources slick and intuitive.

At all points the game impresses with the accessibility of its UI – which coheres well with the bold, clean, super-saturated art direction. The world itself is a fully 3D globe which you can zoom out to see in its cartoonish entirety. Your various advisors and competing leaders are memorable caricatures that pop up onscreen, reacting amusingly to your diplomatic choices, barging each other out of the way to gain your attention.

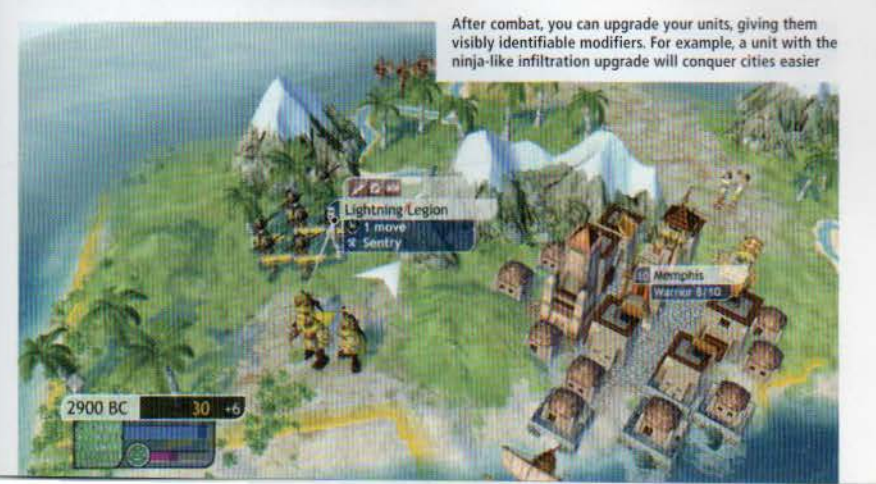
Meier claims this to be his favourite *Civ* game yet. He would say that, of course, but it certainly seems to be the case that *Revolution* is far from a poor cousin to its PC predecessors. Even the DS version, Firaxis claims, runs on the same code as the version coming to 360 and PS3 – it is only the graphics that have been scaled back. With its vivid and distinct design ethos, depth and speed, *Civilization: Revolution* looks like it might be the first strategy game to conquer the crossplatform market.



Thanks for the Meier-mory

One thing that Meier misses from the PC *Civs* is the channel for exchanging content: "User-to-user content is at a different level on the PC because there'll always be something that'll host it, whereas on consoles it's controlled by Sony or Microsoft and so the user can't create a mod and just share it with other players. And that was a significant part of *Civilization*'s vitality on the PC. So that's something we're not able to do with this generation. But we're there and making downloadable content on the consoles ourselves, so that's the first step, and maybe in the future channels and networks will open for users to create their own content."

After combat, you can upgrade your units, giving them visibly identifiable modifiers. For example, a unit with the ninja-like infiltration upgrade will conquer cities easier



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2008**

Race Driver One

Don't let the working title deceive you: the descendent of TOCA hopes to give birth to a wholly new racing franchise









The dev team has apologised for the roughness of the early build we've seen. This strikes us as false modesty, as the Neon engine recreates Milan with startling fidelity

Eventually to be released under a different name, Codemasters' claim is that this game will push the genre in a different direction, away from previous *Race Driver* titles, this time focusing on five- to ten-minute bursts of adrenalising motorsport. You will join the ranks of a persistent, global table of race drivers numbering in the thousands and all competing to become world number one.

It's a curiously unreal conceit for a genre that prides itself on the simulation of reality – the whole world, singly and completely obsessed with driving. Starting as a driver for hire, you will eventually work up enough cash to found your own team. From there, you can hire new and better teammates, buy and kit out cars, and increase your reputation in order to sign sponsors.

Just as Codemasters' other recent racing release, *Dirt*, has attempted to diversify its offering in comparison to previous *Colin McRae* games, *Race Driver One* also throws a fair variety of challenges at the player, themed by type and location: America is the arena of the muscle car, Japan the place for ad-hoc street races, and Europe the centre for organised touring car events. And each area is realised with some authenticity, thanks to the ever-impressive efforts of the Neon engine – also contributing environmental and car damage to the mix.



Codemasters claims that the game will have a broader range of events than in any previous instalment of the *TOCA* series, forcing the player to mix up racing styles

Race Driver One has an eminent heritage regardless of the name, but will ditching the IP be of benefit? Without a distinct bias towards the arcade end or sim, and with graphical fidelity already pushed so far, it seems difficult for a new racing brand to distinguish itself in a field dominated by longstanding franchises.

Guilty Gear 2: Overture

A new instalment in the series known for its 2D brawlers heads off in an unprecedented direction

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ARC SYSTEM WORKS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**



The *Guilty Gear* series has no small amount of history, having appeared on many formats, but this is the first attempt to refashion in an RTS manner

Arc System Works, once a developer eking out a corner of the arcade in the shadow of bigger names, is now busy establishing a name for itself as a publishing house. In line with this upscaling of ambition, it has decided to revisit its leading franchise with an eye for radical renovation. Departing from its roots, this latest *Guilty Gear* is an attempt to court the console market, and will not only see the move to 3D, but also to an entirely different genre of game. *Overture* is an action game, utilising some of the fighting combos familiar to the series, although with the new 3D layout you will find yourself engaged with multiple enemies, making the action more like that of a hack-and-slasher than the duelling of previous instalments.

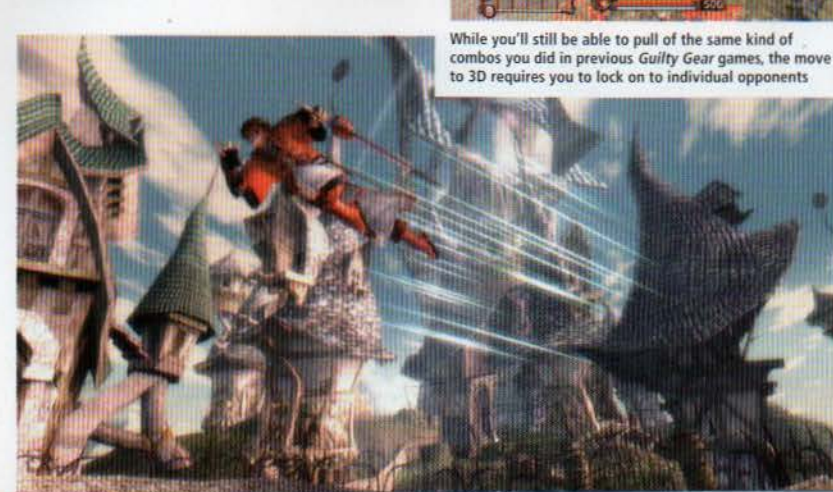
In a further innovation, this action is used to serve RTS-style play, in which the player must capture structures that spawn enemy troops. As you progress you earn points which can be spent on robotic AI allies and healing units – co-ordination of which is required to bring down the larger targets.

The new format does not entail a rejection of the *Guilty Gear* world, however, and *Overture* continues the story from a point several years after the first game in the series. The improbably named Sol Badguy returns, along with his foil Ky Kiske, who has apparently ascended to the throne of Icuria, and these two will be joined by a number of new characters. Although few details have been announced, it looks like the series will support between two and four players over Xbox Live.





While you'll still be able to pull of the same kind of combos you did in previous *Guilty Gear* games, the move to 3D requires you to lock on to individual opponents



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 7**

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools Of Destruction

One of the flagship PS2 series makes the leap to PS3 in a marriage with something old as well as something new



Dance!

As ever, the game is full of imaginative ways to rain destruction on the army of robots you'll be facing. By far the most pleasing of these is the Groovitron, a metallic sphere that, when thrown, quickly morphs into a disco ball; it rises to a height just above the enemies, some funky music plays, and your enemies helplessly begin dancing. It's been incorporated with such visual charm and the enemies' dance moves are so enthusiastically expressive that it seems almost a pity to wrench them to oblivion when they're having so much fun. (But, among all the hand gestures, spins, jumps and moonwalking on offer, why don't they ever 'do' the robot?)





The environments cover the usual range of themes – ice, forest, factory – but the series has always produced variation within limits

R*atchet & Clank* has never been what you'd call a subtle series, with each PS2 sequel bringing more odd weapons and bizarre twists of humour into the protagonists' world. For the PS3 debut, however, things are getting scaled up considerably – and not just the guns.

Despite the title, *Tools Of Destruction* is as much about returning the series to its platformer roots as it is cramming in every variety of destructive weaponry imaginable. There are still the old favourites, of course, because turning a crowd of onrushing robots into blinking penguins (complete with little hats and scarves) can only look that much better in HD. Visually, the game is very accomplished and vividly coloured, with the temptation to be too fussy over the details eschewed in favour of a clear and far-reaching sense of design.

The levels are certainly panoramic, with great lines of city blocks, mountains and trees running off into the distance. The Metropolis level, however, shows this to be mostly a beautiful sheen with little allowance for exploration. As an early stage, this may be the result of a desire to guide the player until they are fully familiarised, but it would be a shame if the colourful settings were simply wallpaper for linear missions.

But though linear, Metropolis does show vertical ambition, with your movement punctuated by jump pads and grind rails that constantly move Ratchet and Clank along and up, which shows off the sometimes spectacularly imaginative design of the surroundings to good effect. In terms of the promise of a return to platforming, there are several moments where the walkway and/or scenery begin collapsing and a fast pace has to be maintained, as well as some side-viewed set-pieces. The only disappointment is the rail grinding which, while not new to the series, seems to move just a little too slowly to ever get the blood pumping, and features relatively perfunctory enemies that perform programmed offensive manoeuvres rather than dynamically engaging you.



There's no arguing with the draw distances or texture quality, while the framerate's extremely smooth. For all the familiarity, it's a massive visual leap for the series

The combat is as beguilingly offbeat as ever, with Ratchet's wrench sending robotic parts flying and cogs spilling out from your enemies and the destructible scenery with abandon. The various weapons (see 'Dance!') are well integrated and can be easily switched around, while even early enemies show the capacity to get the odd lick in on you themselves.

Nearing release, *Tools Of Destruction* doesn't look like it will offer anything significantly new, but it does promise to be an extremely solid and accomplished platformer – and therefore a valuable addition to the late-'07 PS3 line-up.



The boss battles show off your own capacity for sheer destruction, as well as some strong character design, though the early encounters, at least, reveal them to be tightly scripted in terms of attack patterns. Series devotees shouldn't mind


ROCK
We're putting the band



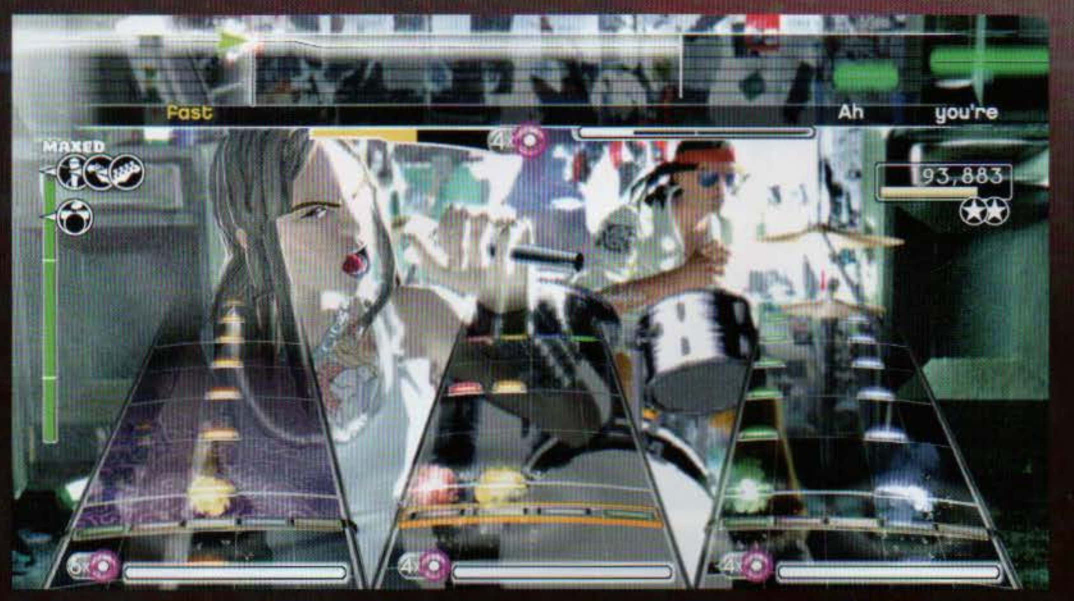
BAND back together

Wanted: lead guitarist, bass guitarist, drummer and vocalist – apply c/o Harmonix, mark applications 'ROCK'

TITLE: **ROCK BAND**
FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MTV WORLDWIDE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX MUSIC SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2007 (US), Q1 2008 (UK)**

"For most of our history," says **Alex Rigopulos**, CEO and co-founder of Harmonix, "it's been a real effort to get the record companies to pay any attention." Things change. The way people access their music has changed. The way people buy their music has changed. Above all else, *Guitar Hero* changed the way people saw music games permanently: "The snowballing with that, combined with the issues that the industry has faced over the last few years, has swung sentiments pretty dramatically."

Harmonix's history dates back to 1995, and from then to now it has refined the genre of rhythm-action games to a fine art. From its beginnings with *The Axe*, which allowed you to pull off instrumental solos by waggling a PC joystick, through *Amplitude* and *Frequency*, and finally to the commercial and critical success of the *Guitar Hero* games, there is nothing but progression, divergence and innovation in the genre. *Rock Band* seems to be at once the end of this process of innovation and refinement, and the beginning of a new development model for the



It might seem that the interface is too cramped to accurately focus, but when playing – even on a relatively small screen – the sections are very well distinguished and any concerns are quickly forgotten about: it becomes a positive pleasure to see the conjunction of flaming notes on an intense section

studio. In fact, the interesting thing about *Rock Band* might not be how good it's going to be – because it *is* brilliant – but how good the infrastructure and support that Harmonix and its commercial partners build around it is going to be.

There are many major players behind the game, most obviously EA, Harmonix and MTV. EA's responsibility is for retail distribution; Harmonix develops; MTV publishes. Another level of involvement comes from the 'big four' music publishers, EMI Music, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group and the Warner Music Group. What this amounts to is one of the biggest marketing machines for any videogame – or, if you prefer, any musical gaming platform – ever seen in the industry, combined with the potential for limitless DLC. The 'big four' are so named because they own the rights to the vast majority of prominent musicians: choose a letter from the alphabet and *Rock Band* could see tracks from The Beach Boys, The Beatles, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Black Rebel Motorcyle Club, Black Sabbath, Blur, David Bowie, James Brown, Busta Rhymes and The B-52s. A handful of covers will ship with the initial retail version, but beyond that the days of 'inspired by' versions will be over.

Similarly, the days of having a screen to yourself are over, but the layout has thoughtfully moved on from *Guitar Hero*: it's a streamlined evolution that is a definite improvement. The counter that builds up your multiplier, for example, is now a circle under the strum bar that fills with colour, with a large number showing your bonus (rather than small dots next to the score at the side) meaning that you can easily see how you're doing without taking your eye off the key part of the screen – particularly important for those high scores on expert level. The three instruments go below, with drums in the centre, while the singing bar floats above, and a bar on the left shows how each instrument in the band is performing, which will trigger bonus jam sessions if all members are playing well.

The real revolution lies in the new peripherals (see 'Ziggy played…') and the structure that Harmonix has created around them. "Peripherals were mandatory for the game we wanted to build, and as game designers it was an incredible opportunity for us to design the hardware around the game," says Rigopulos. Thirdparty peripherals will be quick in arriving after release, but while there will undoubtedly be the usual cheaper versions, there will be a market for players who want

Ziggy played guitar

The guitars work in the same manner as their predecessors, with some fine-tuning of the interface for particularly gnarly moments. The look is black and sleek, with special solo buttons at the base of the neck to be used during clumped chords with both hands (which feels shamefully cool), a new 'pinched' end to the strum button, and the colours appearing along the side of the neck rather than the face. Other improvements include making it possible to switch the strap around for lefties, and a new five-way effects switch that sits alongside chunky navigation keys.

Paul DeGooyer (above) is MTV's senior vice president of audio, home video and electronics. Busy man. Alex Rigopulos (left) is CEO and co-founder of Harmonix Music Systems, and according to his biog plays 'in some of the world's worst rock bands'

to fetishise their instruments with upgrades. The rockstar vibe has been prominent in the prerelease hype, which included a bus touring America and appearing outside the MTV Awards. As well as the crowds outside, groups spent the evening playing inside. "Gym Class Heroes played for about 45 minutes and wouldn't get off," recalls MTV's **Paul DeGooyer**. "And the drummer who'd never played the game sat down on the drums, put it on expert and killed it. He owned them!" The band later picked up the Best Newcomer gong, and Rigopulos adds: "They were still playing when their award was announced – they had to stop to go and get it!"

We're not all Best Newcomer winners, however, so *Rock Band* gives you the chance to recreate your inner rock god. The character-creation tool allows you to tweak the dimensions of your musician, although not to the pointless level of nostril width, but the real customisation lies in the game's fashion accessories. A massive clothing library exists, as well as hairstyles, jewellery and other trinkets, while your character's attitude can be adjusted to affect their posture and how they move. Perhaps the feature with the most potential, however, is a 2D painting system that can be used to create tattoos or clothing patches. "And there's facepaint as well," adds Rigopulos. "The tattoo systems, the patches – they're incredible. People are going to go nuts."

But with your rockstar tattooed up, and the interface understood, how does the game come together? Beautifully, after two or three practice songs to acclimatise with your 'bandmates'. The feeling that any player had the first time they understood *Guitar Hero* and nailed a tricky solo is squared thanks to the co-operative element and the improved visual feedback – as a slew of notes cascade down and across the screen, and each member of your band hits their marks perfectly, the song booms out and the audience goes wild. It's easy to describe: you simply feel like you're in a band. Ludicrous as that may seem, it's impossible to think otherwise while playing, and thanks to easy visual cues you quickly come to appreciate each member's touches to the performance: 'bass groove' appears on the screen to show your bassist isn't missing a note, the drummer crashes through a fat green freeform section like a dinosaur, and the singer hits every note with crystal sweetness. Then, your own progress through a guitar solo appears as a percentage ticking upwards. On it rolls: 92, 94, 96, 98, you hit the last note dead on, then 100 per cent, the crowd onscreen goes bananas, your band launches into the next section, and there's never been an experience in gaming quite like it.



The visual stylings of *Rock Band* are steeped in the mythology created by the likes of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, with long hair and ridiculous open shirts the order of the day. It would be quite outrageous if the entire soundtrack to This Is Spinal Tap isn't available to download at some stage

Amid all this multiplayer excess it's important to remember that, if you want to be the one and only, solo players are comprehensively catered for. There's a complete solo career (as well as the quickplay option) for each of the individual instruments, barring bass, along with all of the usual leaderboards, tutorial and practice modes carried over from *Guitar Hero II*. Of course, some people just aren't happy with either solo gunning or co-op, and *Rock Band* allows any combination of instruments to face off against each other, whether it's guitar versus drums or two singers. All of the multiplayer modes can be played online or offline in any combination, but how does Rigopulos see play panning out? "The ultimate form of the *Rock Band* play experience is in a living room with a bunch of friends. Online offers the chance for people who want to play together but can't be together, and there are ranked online matches against other

"THE ULTIMATE FORM OF THE ROCK BAND EXPERIENCE IS IN A LIVING ROOM WITH A BUNCH OF FRIENDS, WHILE FOR OTHERS THERE ARE RANKED MATCHES ONLINE"





Orange lines appearing in the drumming sections (left) prompt use of the foot pedal

Song stars

Rock Band's full tracklisting remains a secret for now, but some of the 45 tunes set to appear in the boxed game include:

Are You Gonna Be My Girl – Jet
Black Hole Sun – Soundgarden
Blitzkrieg Bop – Ramones
Brainpower – Freezepop
Celebrity Skin – Hole
Cherub Rock – Smashing Pumpkins
Creep – Radiohead
Dani California – Red Hot Chili Peppers
Detroit Rock City – Kiss
(Don't Fear) The Reaper – Blue Öyster Cult
Enter Sandman – Metallica
Epic – Faith No More
Gimme Shelter – Rolling Stones
Go With The Flow – Queens Of The Stone Age
The Hand That Feeds – Nine Inch Nails
Here It Goes Again – OK Go
Highway Star – Deep Purple
I Think I'm Paranoid – Garbage
In Bloom – Nirvana
Learn To Fly – Foo Fighters
Main Offender – The Hives
Maps – Yeah Yeah Yeahs
Mississippi Queen – Mountain
Paranoid – Black Sabbath
Reptilia – The Strokes
Sabotage – Beastie Boys
Say It Ain't So – Weezer
Should I Stay Or Should I Go – The Clash
Suffragette City – David Bowie
Tom Sawyer – Rush
Vasoline – Stone Temple Pilots
Wanted Dead Or Alive – Bon Jovi
Wave Of Mutilation – Pixies
Won't Get Fooled Again – The Who

As well as this, albums confirmed for download thus far include The Who's Who's Next, Nirvana's Nevermind, Metallica's One, plus an 18-track selection from The Grateful Dead.



The players are maxed, there are five stars under your score, you can't miss a note, and the multipliers are increasing – these are the greatest moments of *Rock Band*, after the initial learning curve with your band and when that overused of terms, synchronisation, comes to define an entirely new experience

Ziggy played microphone

The *Rock Band* microphone is plain black, weighty, topped with a metal grille, and it recognises singing from any reasonable direction. Harmonix's claims for phoneme detection are evident in practice: if you hum into the mic, it will certainly register your pitch and stop you failing the song, but the higher scores and bonuses will immediately stop coming into play – and reappear when you begin warbling properly. On some tracks, silver circles float across the screen bar in place of vocals and the mic doubles up as a tambourine (or cowbell – or, conceivably, any other percussion instrument) to be patted against your palm (or indeed any other surface).

players. What we're offering is the opportunity." Will the ugly spectre of lag raise its head? Rigopulos won't be drawn on details, but insists: "We have a solution to that problem in which we're extremely confident – it's rock solid and we've played a ton of online games using it."

The other online aspect is, of course, downloadable content. With individual tracks, complete albums and hand-picked best-of collections, it's hard to imagine any wannabe-rocker not delighted by the prospect, and any wallet not groaning at it. The exact number of tracks that *Rock Band* will ship with is so far unconfirmed (although the singleplayer tour is claimed to be larger than that of *Guitar Hero II*, with some 40 songs) but at least one major release will be provided per week through DLC, many of which will be full albums. It might seem rich to pay for an entire songlist that can only be listened to by playing the associated game, but even here *Rock Band* has a spoonful of sugar for the bad medicine: the collections and albums – the recently announced Metallica pack, for example – can be played in the game as a series, which will presumably be themed around the band in question, and can be considered as entire downloadable levels rather than a tracklisting.

And the prospects are much broader than they may appear. The announcement of 18 tracks from The Grateful Dead may have seemed to be aiming at a specific niche, "but that's the promise of DLC," insists DeGooyer. "The Grateful Dead aren't necessarily niche but they do have a fanbase that absolutely loves them – you could go to the other extreme where maybe there's an artist with only one radio outlet, but it's a tremendous track and perfect for the game; we'd like to be able to introduce them to the *Rock Band* platform." Does *Rock Band* have room for unsigned bands as well as crinkly stadium rockers? "Yes, there will be both."

It also has room for a focus on regional tracklists, in Europe even localising for specific countries. Though Rigopulos simply laughs when enquiries are made about David Hasselhoff for Germany, and grudgingly admits that "an argument could be made" for British music being superior to all others, the philosophy is serious: "These games are at the core all about music and connecting people more deeply with the music they love, so to release the American soundtrack in Europe didn't make sense to us – we're releasing multiple versions with localised content on the disc, and that will be mirrored by the DLC."

That's a big task, and the range of the DLC is a major promise, but an important aspect of *Rock Band*'s development has been the focus on involving major musical talent from outside Harmonix. One of the features of the DLC process sees Steve Van Zandt chairing an advisory committee on the songs chosen. As well as The E Street Band and his solo projects, Van Zandt is behind Little Steven's Underground Garage, a radio show that presents rock as a continuum from the 1950s onwards and has

There are various stadia that can be customised in as-yet-unknown ways, each with their own distinctive palette and pyrotechnic displays (and, hopefully, giant inflatables) to back you up





The difficulty settings seem, if anything, slightly toned down on the lower settings, but Harmonix's devoted following will settle for nothing less than sheer punishment on the hard and expert settings – and that's exactly what they'll get. Doubtless the wireless guitar versions will ease things a touch

"WE DECIDED THAT IT WAS ALREADY INSANELY AMBITIOUS TO LAUNCH A GAME THAT HAD THREE PERIPHERALS, AND KEYBOARDS WERE SOMETHING WE COULD COME BACK TO"

obvious crossovers with the appeal of the game, not least in terms of tone (the show chooses 'the coolest song in the world this week'). From *Rock Band*'s genesis, DLC has been fundamental. "As we were looking to expand to hundreds and then thousands of tracks, we wanted some different perspectives on how you use *Rock Band* to introduce music to the world," explains Rigopulos. "That's what led to the conversation with Little Steven, and beyond him we're going to assemble a mix of musicians in different genres, different instrumentalists, record industry people, and even record A&R people who have been on the frontlines of the industry for decades and bring a wealth of knowledge. That will really bear fruit for the audience."

As for where the game could expand outside of musical DLC, there might be the opportunity to have the game evolve rather than it be a purely iterative process. When talking about the genesis of *Rock Band*, Rigopulos offers a tempting glimpse into a peripheral future: "There was plenty of debate about the instruments, at least in the first incarnation of the game, and the big instrument on the chopping block was keyboards. And we decided that it was already insanely ambitious to launch a game that had three peripherals – and guitars, drums, bass, and singing are all core, indispensable instruments to the heart of rock and roll. Keyboards were important, but maybe optional, and something we could come back to in a future incarnation."

But among all the talk of ongoing support for *Rock Band*, it's difficult to imagine a studio as innovative and devoted to excellence as Harmonix dedicating the foreseeable future to DLC. "We'll make a substantial investment in raising the *Rock Band* platform to the next level," says Rigopulos, "but I really do feel like this is the very beginning for us. Now is the time when Harmonix has the freedom and resources to start doing what we have been dreaming of doing for more than a decade now. We have the credibility and the resources to start initiatives and get projects going that would have been impossible in the past." It's certainly true that the musical genre in videogames is just beginning to open up, and arguably *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, glorious as they are, may just be the forerunners of a bright future. "Harmonix wants to be at the front of that," agrees Rigopulos.

It might be truer to say that it already is. It's difficult to imagine any of the obvious competitors measuring up to *Rock Band* as a whole package: it's overreaching, full of content, full of potential, and just a riot to play. How Harmonix created it is simple, and it's old-school: it served a long apprenticeship, perfected its art with every tool in the field, and then worked its ambition and talent to the bone, going far beyond what was expected, and beyond what was even hoped for. It's a new type of experience with the potential to last for a very, very long time indeed, a fulfilment of a great concept, and a true culmination of Harmonix's work in the field over the past decade. That makes it the best music game you'll ever play – at least until the developer makes another.






The drum kit can be easily disassembled for storage. It isn't horribly heavy, either, but it withstands the most enthusiastic of poundings

Ziggy played drums

The drum kit is designed to withstand a heavy lashing with the licensed sticks that come packed in, and the pads balance on individual plastic 'cups' to this end, while a foot pedal can be placed wherever is most convenient. Asked to elaborate on Harmonix's claim that people can pick up the basics of drumming from the game, Rigopulos says: "As you're eventually playing on hard or expert difficulty, you're playing the drum patterns from the original music note for note. Having that as the payoff of playing a videogame is one of the most exciting pieces of the game. It's been amazing to watch our QA department: about 30 people started out and now a few months into testing this whole suite of fairly competent drummers is down there."



TITLE: **CONFLICT: DENIED OPS**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **PIVOTAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2008**



Conflict of interest

It's taken just over two years for Pivotal, creator of the Conflict series, to move on a generation, create its own tech, and develop a game with it. Has the sailing been as smooth as it appears?

Conflict is indeed the word. Located in the winding wilderness between Bristol and Bath in England's south west, Pivotal Games is snuggled up in a series of rustic barns against a backdrop of rolling countryside. There's absolutely no clue as to the fact that this studio has been responsible for some five wargames – *Conflict Desert Storm I* and *II*, *Vietnam* and *Global Storm*, plus *The Great Escape* – in the past five years. The only environmental destruction here comes from littering; the only air-to-ground ordnance from the swallows that nest in the eaves. It's a hotzone for no one but blackberry-picking pensioners, and the only friendly-fire tragedies and thousand-yard stares are those to be seen on the on-site green that, come lunchtime, is used as a football pitch. But it's here that the next title in the *Conflict* series – *Denied Ops*, due for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC in February 2008 – is being bolted together, a co-operative and heavily destructive military shooter crafted within an idyll of rural silence and ample parking.

We aren't here for such views, however. We're here for those of two armies of two, those of **Alex McLean** and **Jim Bambra**, the respective technical director and managing director at Pivotal, and those of Lang and Graves, the stars of *Denied Ops*, a firstperson shooter rather than the thirdperson of past *Conflict* titles. A quick tour of Pivotal's studio, scattered across multiple buildings, shows the company's flexible approach to management. Having swollen to just under 100 people, up from 50, in the past two years, Pivotal's staff isn't grouped as batteries of programmers, artists, etc, but by aspects of *Denied Ops* that each cross-discipline clump is working on.

Has this cocktail-style approach to staff layout been the greatest change you've had to implement in the past two years, since the release of *Conflict: Global Storm* and the end of your previous-gen work?

Jim Bambra: We've had some management changes in how we structure the company to accommodate the staff increase, but it's been very exciting. The growth sounds like a lot, but it has felt gradual. There are a lot of experienced developers here; as a team, we go back to Microprose UK, and the core of staff here is highly talented. Although we've had a lot of new people, it's been easy to integrate them. But what worked five years ago doesn't work now, but we're still playing around with the best way to get everybody focused.

Alex McLean: Previously, with everyone in one room, it was very easy to communicate what was going on in the game and know first-hand what everyone was up to. Now, you need to put effort into making sure that communication continues to get around to the right people. We've had to start up some new initiatives, so that the team know what they're doing, but they also know in high-level, general terms what the company's up to.

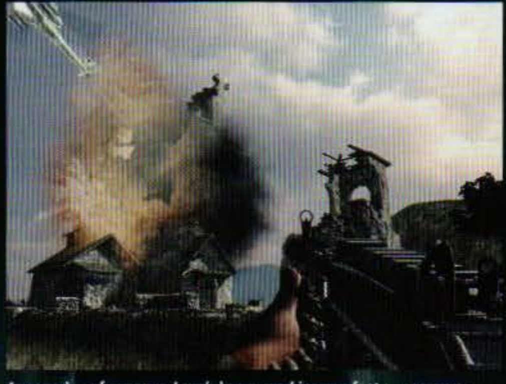
Initiatives? Can you give us an example?

AM: One of the most recent things we've put in place are steering groups, which exist for individual games that we're working on, plus areas of tech. We have a different expert representative from each field sitting on the steering group, setting quality bars, setting initial work and breaking down problems that need to be solved.

What category of staff member have you had to ramp up the most for 360 and PS3 work?

JB: It's been pretty much the same across the board. More planning, more designers, more artists, more programmers… No single department has grown any more than another. But we do outsource some of the artwork these days, so the production can be done in shorter periods than in-house.





As a marker of progress, Lang's heavy machine gun features as many polygons as all four character models in previous *Conflict* titles' teams

You've said it's been an exciting time for you. How about stressful?

JB: Not so much. We've done so many products… and it's all cyclical. You get things rolling, get the focus going, then a big production period, then the end crunch… It's not been more stressful. We can just do more stuff these days. It's been quite a leap in quality, both graphically and in terms of the size of things we can create. But, yes, there is some stress, but it's something you just accept. As Pivotal, we've been through all of the ups and downs.

Since so many developers seem to be on a perpetual recruitment drive, have you had any trouble finding people of sufficient quality?

JB: Recruitment's been steady, although not as fast as we'd like. But the advantage is that we have time to integrate new people properly. We have an established senior team, so often we're looking for grads, to get them trained in the ways of Pivotal. While all developers do a similar job, the approach can vary between companies. It's interesting because everyone's going through the same thing, all looking for the same people, but the good people don't tend to move around very much. They're quite settled wherever they are – products are happening, money's being made, games are getting into the charts, and they've got professional satisfaction.

AM: We've definitely had a lot of success with programmers, bringing in high-achievement graduates from the 'hard' sciences – maths, physics, comp science, engineering. If we can find someone with a good degree, a great personality and who is really into games, then the chances are that fitting them in after partnering them up with someone suitable will be a much easier job. So we've had some great results.

Have you found that the number of graduates with relevant qualifications has decreased?

AM: I'm finding that there are just as many great candidates from the maths/physics world as from comp science/AI world. I have a slight objection to the more vocational game design courses, in that they tend to have markedly lower entrance requirements for students to get on to those courses, and so we tend to look for people from the hard science background. Although it's great to build on such a qualification with a masters degree in videogames; there are a few universities offering great masters courses in such multimedia technologies. Some of the finest programmers we've got here are recent graduates; if someone's super-smart and has a good personality, then we'll happily train them up. Maybe we've just been lucky.

JB: One of the things you still want is a passion for games. Such people carry a lot of knowledge with them. That always helps a lot. People from outside the industry, if they're not interested in games, it's very hard for them. Try as we might, we talk game-ese quite a lot, and those without the background in games find it very hard to close that gap. Someone who's never played *MGS* or *GTA*, there's no way we can get them up to speed on what's been happening for the past ten years in gaming. Even animators need certain knowledge about the way game characters move and work.

How do you keep your staff happy?

JB: We keep people involved in what we're doing, to get them to understand what we're trying to achieve, and what their part in it is. While you may be building the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, some people are just making bricks and mortar… While it may look beautiful when built, it's just about keeping that in mind.

AM: We also place a lot of importance on hiring people who are basically good guys, so the personality is important; you don't want anyone who'd piss the team off and put the cat among the pigeons. It used to be technology that stressed me



Pivotal's managing director Jim Bambra (left) and technical director Alex McLean have joint experience that stretches as far back to involvement with Microprose and Eidos' Pumpkin Studios (responsible for *Warzone 2100*), before Pivotal was founded in 2000 under publisher SCi, with 15 initial staff



out and kept me awake at night. Now it's much more about the dynamics of the people in the company, and solving problems that allow people to be good at doing their jobs.

***Conflict: Denied Ops* was built using in-house technology – do you regret going down the route of custom tech, instead of licensing middleware?**

AM: We're not inherently against thirdparty tech. It's not so much where it comes from, but whether it's the right tool. We're not too proud to not use external tech. That said, there's some value in using our own, and we've invested heavily in it. There's a huge amount of knowledge here about it, and, of course, it means you could get issues fixed on a Saturday or Sunday if you needed, which counts. We're happy where the engine is now, it's getting better every day and we're always adding to it. For the last-gen, we released five titles over 20 SKUs, and we did all that with internal technology. As to whether we'll use middleware engines in the future, I think we probably will, and it's a sign of maturity coming to the industry. It's inevitable, but it's just a case of selecting it when it's appropriate.

Do you have anything to add to the ease-of-development debate regarding 360 vs PS3?

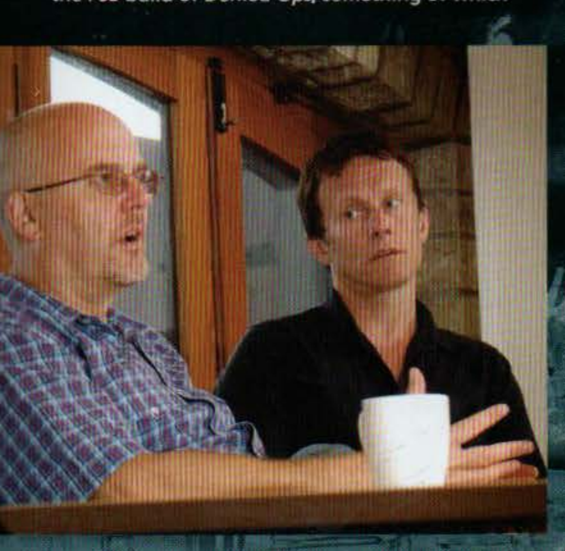


Two language tracks have been recorded for *Denied Ops*, featuring varying strengths of profanity. The version to which we were exposed was obviously the more hardcore of the two, a surprise even on the back of having played games like *Saint's Row*. Pivotal hasn't yet decided which way it will lean

"AS TO WHETHER WE'LL USE MIDDLEWARE ENGINES IN THE FUTURE, I THINK WE PROBABLY WILL, AND IT'S A SIGN OF MATURITY COMING TO THE INDUSTRY. IT'S INEVITABLE"

AM: I think we've been quite surprised with PS3. It may be because we've done five PS2 games, and so are very familiar with the Sony tools and the SN [Systems] tools. While we've struggled along like everyone else to make sure that we're throwing right amount of work to the PS3's SPUs, we've had to do that on 360 too; I wouldn't say we've found the PS3 any more difficult, and our guys who are on it genuinely enjoy working on the platform. I think there's just been some unwarranted negative commentary, and it's just a case of really putting the effort in.

As if to prove the point, we're sitting down with the PS3 build of *Denied Ops*, something of which Pivotal is suitably 'proud'. The subtitle of this new *Conflict* is down to its black ops nature, where the two-strong team of protagonists – Lang and Graves – are members of the Special Activities Division, soldiers which the US government can utilise but not be linked to. They're a fairly archetypal videogame odd couple, Graves the cool-headed professional sniper and Lang the foul-mouthed brutalist with a heavy machine gun. The game opens in a monastery in Venezuela, a straightforward hop through some corridors and multi-tiered rooms to get the hang of *Denied Ops*' workings, which prove to be equally straightforward. This is the typical *Conflict* co-op experience, streamlined and stripped to the kind of one-click ordering that Amazon.com is so protective of – a single button takes care of all commands, issued under context. Point at an enemy for them to be taken down, a computer terminal for it to be used, open a door, blow up a vehicle or take cover behind an object. Holding down the button calls your AI partner to your side, where they'll mirror your stance but still roam the immediate vicinity and keep a sharp lookout.



Switching between each character is instant, in terms of game time. The action freezes as the camera speedily follows a dolly that pathfinds between the two characters, tracing the route that the AI itself would use to move between the two points, thus reinforcing your awareness of just where your partner is situated. And from a vanilla infiltration of the monastery itself, extraction sees Lang and Graves exiting to a large courtyard, before hopping into a light infantry vehicle. Accompanied by an allied chopper, there follows a heavyweight shootout across a wide-open length of grassland

Speed run

It's not something you'd expect to stand out, but then the *Conflict* games have often been experiences that value stability and thoughtfulness over any adhesion to realism: *Denied Ops*' first stage hosts a BMP, a Soviet infantry fighting vehicle, that's not like most heavy-duty military transport you'll find in virtual war games. The reason? It's ultra-nippy, and artificially so, to encourage players to actually enjoy using it. A single button press sees your teammate jump into the driver's seat; give the command for them to move it to another position, and it races along like a remote-controlled car, at a pace that makes it feel more like a useful toy rather than a necessary fallback.









If anyone still laments the omission of regional British accents in the *Conflict* games post-*Desert Storm II*, *Denied Ops* has some compensation up its sleeve – one of the villains is to be voiced by Christopher Fairbank, aka Moxey from Auf Wiedersehen, Pet

that terminates in a field of scattered ruins, and involves further aggressive air support, along with what's very likely your first taste of defeat.

There's no visible energy bar, but the screen washes and fades to indicate that you're close to being knocked unconscious. Once one of your team is down, you've two minutes to find and revive them, with no limit to how often they can be healed. While *Denied Ops* may flit between a greater range of scenarios and environments than ever before – including a Siberian castle, a diamond mine, a whaling station and a hectic shootout in the streets of an African township – there's a perennial *Conflict* trait that emerges from a playthrough of the first level alone. It's smart without feeling technical, teammate AI offers reassurance rather than frustration, and it's considerate without being a pushover. For example, Lang's and Graves' main weapons – a heavy machine gun and sniper rifle, respectively – are kitted out with infinite ammo, and it's only more serious incendiary devices that need to be topped up at resupply points.

Is providing the player with infinite ammo risky? Why did you favour it? Not that we wouldn't welcome a choice that lessens the amount of busywork in games...
JB: The game's not about finding ammo. A sniper rifle, for example, is a tool of your trade. If you're dropped into a battlezone, it's not your job, after your first firefight, to go searching for ammo. If you're playing *Call Of Duty 2* and doing Stalingrad, then fair enough, but in a modern war environment you'd expect to be equipped for your mission.

Why did you shift from the standard *Conflict* format, from a four-strong team to just two?
JB: We wanted to do something different. It's not radically different, but we wanted to make it more accessible. With four soldiers, it's all about setup; with two, it's more immediate. Which went hand in hand with the simplification of the controls and the inventory management. The plan was to make a game that anyone can pick up and play. You don't need to be a hardcore squad-based player.

"SIMPLIFICATION OF CONTROL IS ALMOST THE HOLY GRAIL OF DEVELOPMENT. SO IT'S QUITE CHALLENGING AND SOPHISTICATED TO HAVE SUCH A SIMPLE ORDER SYSTEM"

Was that the plan right from the outset?
JB: We knew we'd make the change of perspective, with two characters, with some tactical depth and a world-spanning story that provides different mission styles and visuals from stage to stage. Simplification of control is almost the holy grail of development. So it's quite challenging and sophisticated to have such a simple order system – and the complexity comes in your partner's act of following these orders. In the past we've had order systems that have been quite complicated. They've been great when we were testing it, but it's a combat situation, and given the speed at which things unfold, you want it simpler.

How do you feel when you look at other firstperson shooters appearing right now, such as *BioShock*? When you look at the lavishness of its production values, does it make you reassess where you think you need to be?
AM: I think we inevitably care, and while *BioShock* may be absolutely beautiful and it's good that it moves the industry on, we don't see that kind of game to be directly comparable to ours. It's not

Breaker breaker

Denied Ops **offers destruction beyond explosive barrels and crumpling crates. Sections of masonry – and even whole parapets – can be punched through in the game's opening stage, while custom holes can be shot in plaster walls to provide convenient lines of fire, or an entry point for a grenade. Having said that, plenty of explosive props are still on hand; gas canisters arc off on a random path before detonating, while barrels, when shot, will bounce before blowing up – an unrealistic touch that proves satisfying in practice. Clutter, debris and corpses are persistent, too – nothing is mopped up from the environment as you work your way through each of the stages.**



something that causes us undue stress. My feeling is that *Rainbow Six* and *GRAW* are fantastic games that do well commercially, but they're a little at the more hardcore end of the market; we tend to make things more accessible.

JB: They're not quite soldier sims, even though the early ones were. We think of our games in terms of recovery – if one of your teammates goes down, you can recover him. We play around much more with point of view, as well. Sure, they're all modern combat games, but there's room for different approaches within a style.

Changing from four-way team strategy to a co-op experience has opened up a whole new avenue of competition, thanks to *Army Of Two* and *Kane & Lynch*. Do you see them as rivals?

JB: *Army Of Two* is different to what we're doing. It doesn't look modern-world and real to me; we're playing with real places and issues with ours.

AM: I think, inevitably, no matter what you set out to do, because it's a long endeavour, there will almost certainly be someone doing a game that's a *lot* like yours. We don't get too stressed about it. And, when you get your hands on them, the comparison often turns out to be superficial anyway.

Nowadays, then, what would you say the *Conflict* brand is about?

JB: It's about real-world situations and battles, from the large-scale encounters of *Desert Storm* to the black-ops matters of *Denied Ops*. The other essence is the co-op play, whether on your own or with friends, with that added edge of survivability, of giving you a chance to learn from your mistakes and take a breather. It's not a puzzle game, but there's always an element of thinking, where you're never strong enough to just rush on through.



Pivotal's staff currently numbers just under 100, and has doubled in size in the past two years. As if to prove Pivotal's location away from the city bustle, an inquisitive local strolled past during the setting up of this group photo: "These people, are they some kind of… athletes?"

Rigorous mortis

Once the smoke has cleared and a firefight has died down, your AI partner, unless commanded otherwise, will roam from corpse to corpse, checking that each tango is indeed down. While Graves does this in a typically quiet, professional manner, Lang has a habit of literally putting the boot in, occasionally indulging in overkill and plugging prone bodies with needless rounds. Once his weapons are fully upgraded, these psychopathic aftertouches are likely to turn into full-on slapstick sideshows of ragdoll abuse that'll draw a guilty giggle rather than a grimace.



Our benefactors

We travel to Seattle to find out how Valve Software has repeatedly played with gaming's rules, and discuss the company's crowning achievement: The Orange Box



Valve may well have outdone itself. Inevitably, such a claim sounds a touch hyperbolic given the history of the company; over the last ten years, the people of Valve Software have created one of the most successful multiplayer games of all time in *Counter-Strike*, redefined excellence in the singleplayer shooter genre – first with the influential *Half-Life*, then again with its stunning sequel – and modernised the way games are delivered using Steam, a digital distribution platform and community service. Now, with the release of *The Orange Box* (previewed in **E**179), Valve's ambitions seem to be ascending in an exponential curve. Putting aside the exceptional quality of the games therein, the manner of its release epitomises Valve's tendency towards unique, and often brilliant, experimentation: *The Orange Box* is a compilation of five parts, bringing together the two previously released instalments of *Half-Life 2* and three entirely new prospects – all for the price of a single new release.

"We had these three projects under development – *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal* – and they were all sort of converging," explains **Gabe Newell**, Valve's founder and leader, recalling the conversation which brought about their amalgamation into a single product. "We were looking at this trying to figure out what to do. In the end we determined to stop thinking about it in

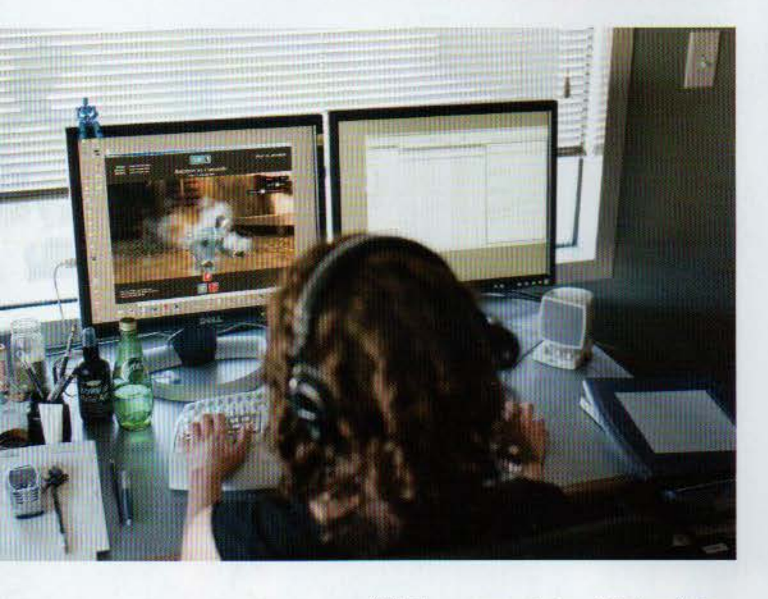


terms of schedules and certification processes and start thinking from the point of view of a customer. What would they think about something like *The Orange Box*? I felt it'd be really exciting for them, and because that was an easy decision for a gamer, it became an easy decision for us to do that. If finding that compelling concept for your customers is the filter on your decisions, you're almost never going to go wrong."

This kind of agility and flexibility is a rare freedom, and for it to be directed with such audaciousness is rarer still. If this was not evidence in itself, it takes only a few hours at Valve's Seattle offices to realise that the company is exceptionally idiosyncratic, even when placed alongside the frequently unorthodox working environments of other videogame virtuosos. Ask nearly anyone what their job title is, and they will take on a pensive expression before suggesting that they might be a designer.

"We don't really do job titles," says **Jeep Barnett**, one of Valve's more recent acquisitions, plucked from university along with the rest of the team behind *Portal*. Later, *Episode Two's* **Gautum Babbar** dismisses the idea that there is any one person behind the direction of the series. It's a recurring theme; responsibilities are shared and positions are rarely set in stone, employees expected to straddle roles and make themselves useful in any way they can.

Gabe Newell (right) is keen to emphasise Valve's openness to community input: "After we do *Episode Three* we're going to sit down and use these three very different examples as discussion points"

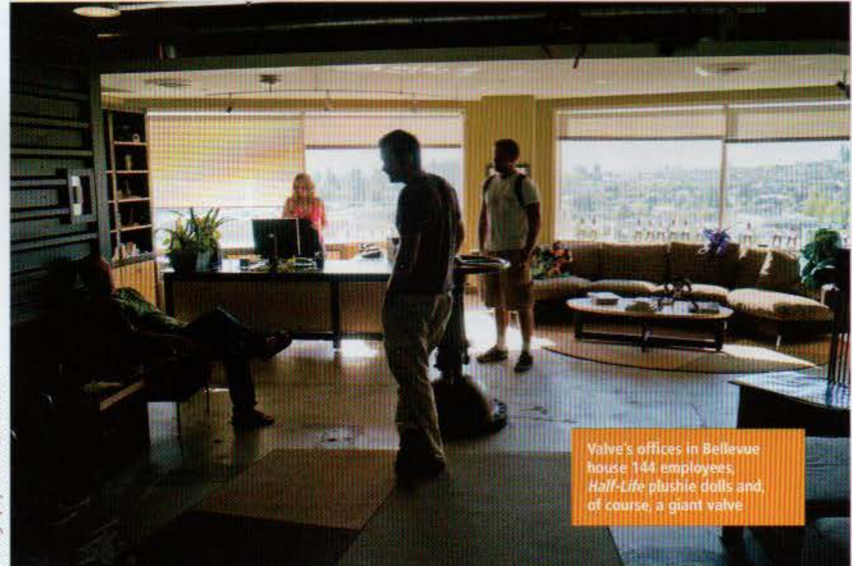


"I think my personal view is that we're in the business of inventing things that haven't existed before," says Newell. "A lot of times, solutions fall between the cracks of existing role definitions. Is this an art problem? Is this a tech problem? Is this a design problem? Often the answer is all of the above, and you need people who are really comfortable spanning multiple disciplines."

It's a need Valve has clearly taken pains to fulfil, and it's somewhat intimidating to discover that nearly everyone in the company seems to be a polymath. Newell picks a few examples off the top of his head: "Ken Birdwell, who wrote all the code in our animation system, also has a fine arts degree and has done a bunch of art shows – he just happens to write code really well. Our HR person is a professional actor who can do voices in our games. Chet Faliszek – he's supposedly a writer, but he functions just as well in a role that is traditionally a producer's role. But he just did it on his own – no one said he was getting promoted to a producer's track – he just started being incredibly useful to everyone else on the *Left 4 Dead* team."

That Valve employs highly talented people is not a surprise – it is a successful enough company that it can afford to be choosy – but there's no doubt that Valve has selected for particular characteristics, too. "When we hire people they tend to be pretty sociable, pretty verbal and capable of deciding on their own what they're supposed to be doing," says Newell. It's a statement that is easily corroborated by any of our conversations around Valve's offices. The atmosphere is perhaps more than usually jubilant, with the crunch to get *The Orange Box* complete finally coming to an end, but there's an easy familial feel to the interaction between employees. Perhaps by virtue of the mutable, indistinct job definitions, no one seems unapproachable or inaccessible. There's also a sense of sharing in something worthwhile – in purely fiscal terms, everybody here owns a piece of the company. It goes further, however.

"The biggest perks for me, and for almost everyone here, are the people you get to work with," says Newell with a rush of earnest enthusiasm. "When I was working for Microsoft I could have carefully managed my investments and never worked again, but I realised that, for me, this is what I want to do – if I can do anything at all I want to be with Doug and Jay and Ken and be solving these really cool problems and touching people's lives with entertainment. Everybody here has those choices. I'm the first person to tell people they could get a job elsewhere in five



Valve's offices in Bellevue house 144 employees, *Half-Life* plushie dolls and, of course, a giant valve

Photography: **Charles Peterson**



minutes. They have to be here because this is the best place for them to be. That sort of attitude tends to breed a really collegial environment. We've had people walk up to Valve staff at tradeshows and say: 'I don't care what you're making, I'll pay you double'. And people laugh, because the things that they value most are their colleagues and the work they get to do. If Valve stops being that way then we'll shed staff really rapidly."

There is another interesting commonality among Valve's staff that sets the company apart from its industry peers, as marketing director **Doug Lombardi** explains: "I'd say more than half the company on the developer and art side has come out of the mod scene. The percentage is wildly higher here than at other companies. We're very vocal about it; had it not been for that openness to embrace the modding community, we'd just be this company that did *Half-Life* stuff all the time. It would have been a big mistake. *Day Of Defeat, Counter-Strike, Team Fortress, Portal* – they all came to us from smart, young people who were doing it already. The only smart thing we did was hire them."

Barnett and **Kim Swift** are two of seven such smart, young people to be hired on the strength of their joint final-year project at DigiPen Institute of Technology in nearby Redmond. Their trajectory into Valve is not an atypical story among their colleagues.

"Every year DigiPen holds an expo for graduating seniors so that they can try to get jobs or interviews," explains Swift. "Apparently a couple of Valve guys were there and saw our game, and invited us to come in and show it to other people at Valve. After about 15 minutes of us demoing the game, Gabe just offered us a job. We thought he was joking. For me it didn't really sink in that I was working at Valve until six months later."

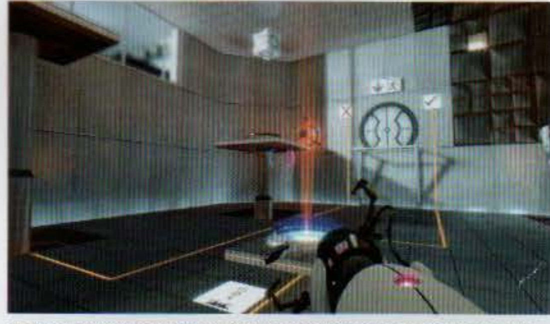
"It definitely felt like we were working on something cool and new," says Barnett of that final-year project, *Narbacular Drop* – the game that laid the groundwork for *The Orange Box*'s physics-puzzler, *Portal*. "I was pretty sure someone would see it and we'd get jobs from it, but I never expected Valve."

"Or that we'd get hired together as a team," Swift interjects. "Gabe said: 'You obviously have some sort of chemistry so let's hire you all at once and see what happens'. *Portal* happened!"

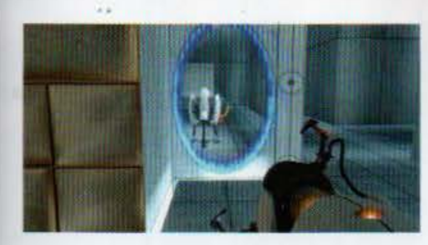
Portal may well be just the kind of neatly innovative idea with which Valve was hoping

"I'd say more than half the company on the developer and art side has come out of the mod scene. The percentage is wildly higher than at other companies"





"If there was one thing that would have made *Narbacular Drop* a lot better it was playtesting," says Swift. "Literally the second week we were at Valve we started playtesting *Portal* – and all we had was just one room with barely anything in it. The first room in *Portal* has gone through a ton of iterations"







to expand its catalogue. Although indirectly referencing the *Half-Life* universe, *Portal* moves in a different direction; it's a firstperson puzzle-game with a unique hook: the ability to open up and link together holes in space. Finding yourself in the role of a human guinea-pig, you must survive a series of wittily inhumane tests of intelligence, requiring you to bend space to traverse pits of toxic gloop, evade mounted gun turrets and eventually escape the laboratorial warrens of Aperture Science. With this simple central premise, Portal conjures up puzzles of considerable complexity and variety – its contortions of space periodically prompting the same kind of cross-eyed brain-crash that comes of staring at an Escher work for too long.

Perhaps most surprisingly of all, *Portal*'s puzzles are strung together by a narrative that, while essentially just dressing its core gameplay, is compelling and bleakly funny. The voice of Aperture Science, an apparently senile AI, introduces you to the sadistic puzzles of each section with hilarious euphemism – a purely amoral scientific doublespeak that presents your captivity as a pleasant stay in the company's 'relaxation vaults'. The much-referenced reward of 'cake', which you will receive for completing the Aperture Science tests, takes on an distinctly ominous quality.

***Half-Life 2*'s various** instalments mix violent action with moments of contemplation as you solve puzzles; *TF2* and *Portal* seem to represent a bifurcation of these qualities into two separate games, each almost the perfect counterpoint to the other, making *The Orange Box* a package of uniquely varied experiences. But the diversification of Valve's catalogue isn't the only benefit that hiring talent from the community has brought to the company. Creating a mod necessarily entails a certain kind of commitment and range of skills – and, with so many modders on the payroll, a particular kind of attitude has permeated the company, and gone on to define Valve's outlook as a whole.



"The fact that the community is so articulate and so forceful in expressing its opinions means that you can take a need and turn it into a game design"

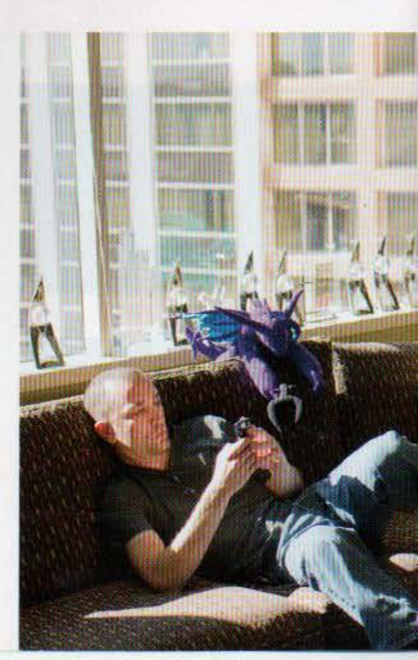
"People in the community are used to being connected very directly to their fans," says Newell. "In fact, they don't think of them as fans – they think of them as friends or people they know through forums. They don't have a marketing staff, they don't have a support staff. They have to do it all themselves – I think that fundamentally instils sound values. They don't think of themselves as auteurs, they just think: 'How can I make these people happier?' I worked at a company where the time between finishing a product and the customers having it in hand was sometimes six months. These guys are used to making a change and then making another 24 hours later from the feedback they got from the first one. Having that type of connection with a customer instils an attitude which is really valuable whether you're building games or anything else. They're fundamentally good business practices."

An intimate connection with the community is something that has defined Valve's direction since its inception, and employing talent from the mod scene reinforces this. In fact, many at the company



Valve's lobby is scattered with *Half-Life*-related oddities. At one point there were plans to install a fireman's pole to join the several floors that make up the offices; oddly, this idea did not meet with fire safety regulations







Robin Walker, a key force behind *TF2*, joined Valve after gaining notoriety in *Quake*'s mod scene





are almost self-effacing in their diligence towards Valve's fans, Newell included.

"I was coming out of the operating systems world, and was fairly panic stricken that all of a sudden I'd have to run an entertainment company," says Newell. "So, completely out of fear, I reached out and said: 'What do you guys want? Please tell me! A month ago I was a gamer just like you and now I'm running a games company'."

This relationship is the core around which Valve has built its approach to game design. Newell is critical of designers who consider themselves unassailable artistes – ultimately their goal should be to serve their customers, and engaging with that community is of paramount importance to both himself and Valve. "The fact that the community is so articulate and so forceful in expressing its opinions means that if you know how to do a good job listening and filtering, you can take a need and turn it into a game design."

Newell appears entirely genuine in his love of the community, warts and all, and when it is suggested that the kind of noise generated by the internet may not yield a high proportion of coherent thought, he prickles slightly. "A lot of people here grew up living in that world," he points out. "Sometimes it feels like just about everyone here has married someone who they met online – which amounts to understanding what people are trying to say rather than getting hung up on the form in which is being said. So if you can meet your wife online, you can probably pick through a forum and figure out something about what they're trying to tell you. If online romance is possible then game design feedback certainly is."

It's not clear whether Newell is guileless or blasé in dismissing the huge scale of this endeavour. He seems surprised that we're surprised. "I read every email I get. After we shipped *Episode One* I got about 7,000 emails – I can't respond to them all, but I can certainly read them all. Sometimes people will give us super-concrete and useful feedback. A mail I got earlier today asked why you can't invite someone from the group admin tab in Steam Community. They often point these things out, and you sort of just hit yourself on the forehead and go, 'Of course – that makes sense!' At times, you have to put on your flame-retardant clothing; some people are really good at saying they're mad, and you have to figure out why and what you're going to do to fix it. But you can't ignore the fact you're not doing a good job. You look at the standard deviation – if you see opinions clustering around a pretty clear mean then that's useful data. I can promise you, if you get 7,000 emails then certain themes become pretty apparent."

Newell might well be referring to the resounding wail that arose from those who died repeatedly during one particular section of *Episode One*. Waiting for the elevator



Although Valve's treasure trove of awards dominate its reception area, it's a cruel eye that isn't drawn to a Combine Hunter plushie

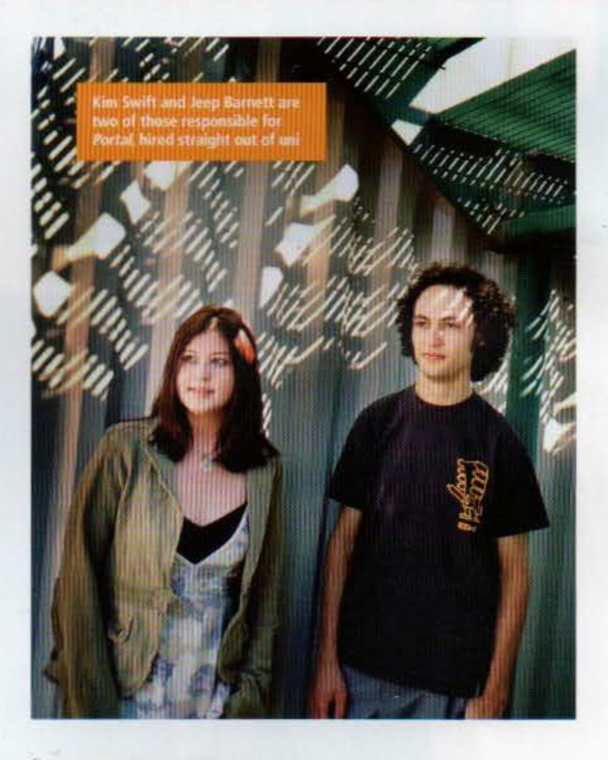
The orange boxout

Although it's unfair to classify either *Portal* or *TF2* as any less significant, much of *The Orange Box*'s sales will ride on recognition of the *HL2* brand: it's fitting that *Episode Two* is substantial – with six to eight hours of play.

"I think with *Episode One* we had a little bit of a challenge selling the concept of an episodic game at all," says David Speyrer. "I think we're over that hump now. I think people understand, mostly, what they're getting. *Episode Two* is definitely bigger, and I think people will be surprised by just how much game there is and how varied an experience it is as well."

"One of the advantages of the episodic story is that it allows us to react to what the community says about the previous episode," Gautum Babbar says of the improvements to the series. "*Episode Two*, for example, has a much deeper story; there are more significant events; we introduce new characters. The overall arc of the story... we knew where we wanted to go, but we're also evolving it at the same time."

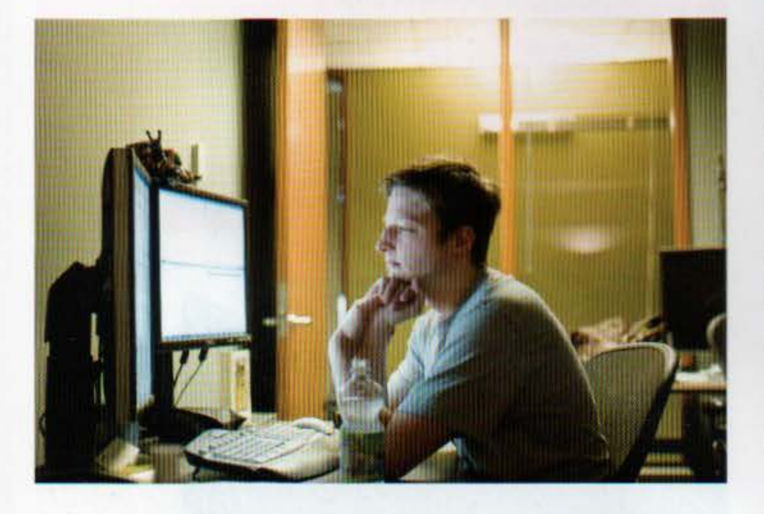
From what we've seen, *Episode Two* promises to be a much more consistent experience than its predecessor despite the greater variety of its challenges. There are more diversions of the kind that made *Half-Life 2*'s coastal section such a credible setting; derelict buildings punctuate the roadside, and there are optional missions to collect weapons caches during your race to a resistance stronghold under threat from the Combine.



Kim Swift and Jeep Barnett are two of those responsible for *Portal*, hired straight out of uni

Garret Rickey (below) is another DigiPen graduate to land a job at Valve via *Narbacular Drop*





which will carry them to comparative safety, Gordon and Alyx must fight off wave after wave of zombies in the pitch dark. Failing torch beams and limited ammunition compounded what was already one of the most taxing portions of the game – but inflammatory emails weren't the only measure of the community's irritation.

"We had data from Steam that showed that people died here a ton and actually stopped playing," says Babbar. "So in the next patch we gave the player more resources for that section. That not only affected *Episode One* but it was feedback that we took on board when we were making *Episode Two*. We consciously tried to give the player more outs without dropping the tension. And so that one datapoint helped us immensely."

Steam has proven to be a worthwhile technology investment for Valve, not least because it is an immensely powerful tool for tracking player behaviour. "We learn how quickly people are advancing to new generations of hardware," says Newell. "Only two per cent of our customers have DirectX 10 and Windows Vista, which really affects how we try to move graphics forward in our game. We're trying to move to more fine-grained feedback loops, like the weapon



pricing in *Counter-Strike*, where the weapon purchase decisions of everybody drives the price, creating a marketplace that balances far better than we would be able to artificially."

"Thanks to Steam we can react to things that we can measure," says **David Speyrer**, a programmer and, inevitably, designer on *Episode Two*. "The more subjective things I guess we consult our collective conscience about – but the elevator section of *Episode One* was a particularly good lesson because we found out that what playtesters say is less reliable than what you can actually see happening to them. We had playtesters who died a bunch but who said it was fun anyway – so we shipped it that way, and then Steam gave us empirical evidence people were getting frustrated."

"We've worked together a long time now," says Newell. "Some of us have been together for a decade; we've really grown to trust each other"







Not only does Steam help locate and identify problems, but with its background streaming, it can fix them, too. It's upon this feature that Valve's game development process, with its obsessive emphasis on feedback and iteration, has centred – as the lead designer on *TF2*, **Robin Walker**, explains: "You look at the data we gather and you immediately know what the best two weeks of work you can do is. I can write code today and it'll be on every one of our customers' machines tomorrow. The ability to get that level of turnaround is so insanely important to us. Half the reason we built Steam at all was to do this. It was really painful before – if the developers released an update for a multiplayer game you needed to go find it yourself. Usually, the reason you even knew you needed an update was because you tried to join a server and couldn't because you had the wrong version. Then for the next week it sucked because half the servers had updated and half of them hadn't – all this is crap a customer shouldn't have to deal with. We wanted a system where we could release a new version and overnight every server and



"The things we are doing with episodic content is an attempt to get our singleplayer stuff to this point where they are shipping more; the faster we can ship, the more feedback we get, the better our decisions are. It sounds too simple to be right, but it actually is. We've seen very convincingly over the years that the best way to keep people playing a multiplayer game is to keep shipping free content. It's how you win the multiplayer war.



"We've seen over the years that the best way to keep people playing a multiplayer game is to keep shipping free content. It's how you win the multiplayer war"

every player was up to date, hopefully before they even tried to join a game. We need to be able to move quickly and measure, because we don't think we're smart enough to get things right first time."

It's a modesty that appears to be ubiquitous among the Valve employees we interview, a respect for their customers and the online community that makes them regard their own roles with surprising diffidence. And, along with this recurring theme, once again, it was Valve's readiness to embrace the mod scene that lay behind the drive towards rapid iteration, and, by extension, Steam.

"We were asking why more people were playing *Team Fortress* than *Quake*; why *Counter-Strike* was so huge," says Walker. One of the things that we felt showed we'd made that right decision with Steam was that in the first two or three months we'd shipped as many updates as we had in the two-and-a-half years previously."

This constant process of iteration and assessment is mirrored internally, prior to shipping, by rigorous playtesting. While it has been responsible for honing their released products to excellence, this same playtesting has also put the nix on a number of projects that didn't meet with Valve's standards.

"Internally, we have a history of failures," says Newell. "Early on, there was a second project called *Prospero*. That has never seen the light of day – even though some of those ideas ended up being incorporated into other games. *Team Fortress 2* is on its third iteration. We just tried stuff and got to a certain point where we realised it wasn't going to be successful. I think the fact that we're willing to admit that something is not going to work gives us freedom. Instead of shipping a bad game, we go back to the drawing board. A lot of places would just shove something out the door that would ultimately disappoint."



"With *Episode Two* the visuals continue to move forward," says Babbar, "but the defining characteristic of the franchise is the transparency of its presentation; minimising the interface, pushing the storytelling and the level of interaction with other characters. It makes the experience much more personal"

It is this bold acceptance of fallibility that has allowed Valve to refine *TF2* into the exquisitely constructed experience it is today. While remaining true to the joys of the original mod's class-based team multiplayer, Valve has renovated and perfected that model into a wholly coherent and balanced design. It has certainly had long enough to do so, given its epic gestation of almost a decade. In his defence, Walker points out that when he came to Valve from his own company, which had started work on *TF2* for the *Quake II* engine, he was to be immediately involved in multiple projects, bringing *Team Fortress Classic* to *Half-Life* and developing that game as a mod platform. *TF2*'s mooted World War II setting was quickly dropped in favour of a futuristic military setting – but that too became problematic.

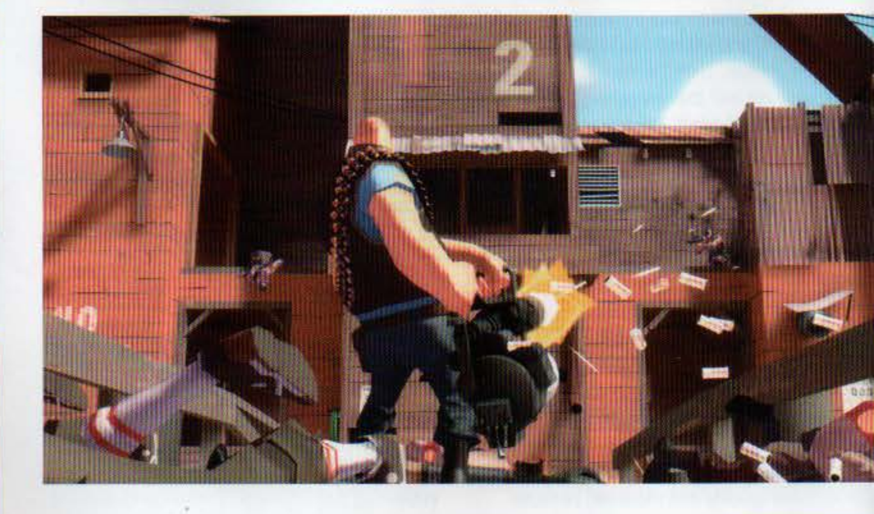
"We kept wanting to do things that were interesting in terms of game design but were difficult to convey to customers in a natural fashion," Walker says. "The obvious problem you have is justifying something in the real world. The best example is the medic's medi-gun – a gun which heals people. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense in the real world, but you still need to realise it in such a way that people can instantly recognise its purpose. Having gone through several iterations already, we were able to really interrogate each design to see if it solved our visualisation problems. I think *TF2* is the first product where we've finally achieved something we've always wanted: that is, to decide on the art direction entirely after we know what the game is."

"I think TF2 is the first product where we've achieved something we've always wanted: to decide on the art direction entirely after we know what the game is"

The result has already been much celebrated in the gaming community: Valve's cel-shaded, comic characters have struck a chord with gamers, while effortlessly conveying the essentials of gameplay – the



***TF2*'s visual style is pragmatic as much as anything – striving for clarity of design. "There's a common misconception that the only way to make something accessible is to reduce complexity," says Walker. "We don't feel that's true – the main challenge for us regards accessibility is visual representation."**





"I think post-*Orange Box* we can call ourselves a console company," says Walker, proud of the minimal differences in play between the 360 and PC versions of *TF2*



The future is orange

Despite once claiming that he'd never written a line of multithreaded code, Gabe Newell is now a convert to the homogenisation that multicore processors will bring. "The more we look at it, the more excited we get," he says. "This current era is one of heterogeneous computing: you've got this one big chunk of code doing physics and AI, character animation and facial systems talking through this strange interface called DirectX to another chunk of your code which you write to run on GPUs. That's just going to go away. You look at how fast Nvidia and ATI have been increasing graphics performance in the last ten years – that's how much faster our physics and AI are going to improve. We're going to be releasing multicore versions of *Counter-Strike* and *Day Of Defeat* and *Half-Life 2* after we ship *The Orange Box*. The challenge is going to be going forward. Right now we just have to deal with an order of magnitude of difference between DirectX 9 and DirectX 7 in terms of fill-rate and number of polygons. That's a set of scaling issues that we've managed to adapt to. Soon we will have to answer the question of how do you design a game that could go from ten characters on screen to 1,000. In 2008 and 2009 we're going to do stuff that's optimised for the new high-end that doesn't scale down, and use Steam to reach those customers, so we can start to learn what to do with 1,000 smart creatures on the screen at once. Then hopefully we can backfill and do more scaleable experiences."

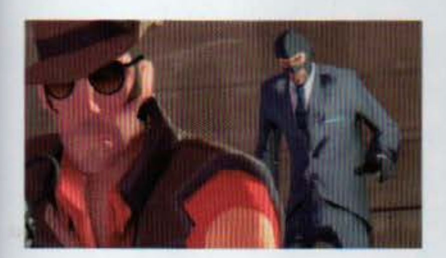


purpose of each item and each class of character. But as polished and appealing a product as *TF2* is, it's hard to imagine that either it or *Portal* would achieve the sales they deserve as standalone products. Even *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* would struggle to overcome the franchise's lower penetration into the console market were it not packaged so irresistibly with the franchise's back catalogue, allowing new players to catch up with the series. Each game comprising *The Orange Box* will undoubtedly have a much longer life as a result of their amalgamation – and that mindshare will benefit future Valve projects. And, as for what shape these future projects might take, there seems to be no shortage of ideas:

"Everybody here has a list of five games that they want to build," says Newell. "Some people want to build MMOs; I want to build a turn-based strategy game. God knows why. The Wii is a big hole in our strategy right now. It's clearly challenging game designers to think very, very differently – proving that input is incredibly important in a way that the industry had kind of forgotten."

Then there's the prospect of *Episode Three*. We ask how Valve intends to outdo *The Orange Box*. As always, Newell nonchalantly turns the question back to the customer, restating his ambition to use feedback to create ever more appealing products for the company's fans:

"That's what comes with the territory," he says of this task. "We're going to have to find something to get people fired up. They'll tell us if we do, and they'll tell us if we don't."







Doug Lombardi (below) is known in the industry as a marketing director of supernatural efficiency. "If Doug says retailers will have a certain reaction, we accept it. Nobody else has a better understanding," says Newell

Illustration: Richard Horsman





ARCADIA

AS PROFITS RISE AND AMBITIONS RETURN, THE COIN-OP INDUSTRY MAKES GOOD ON ITS DECISION TO CONTINUE RATHER THAN QUIT

Coin-ops, known somewhat coldly nowadays as 'the out-of-home sector' and 'location-based games', have experienced a reversal of fortunes over the last couple of years, even if the arcade industry is still a shadow of its former self. The Twin Galaxies website claims the loss of all but one per cent of the amusement halls listed in its initial database, while Fox News reports the number of US sites as having slumped from an estimated 10,000 during the '80s heyday to a mere 3,500 now.

But here's the interesting bit. Just four years ago, that estimate stood at only 2,500 sites.

WITH THEIR REFURBISHED CABINETS, VENUES SUCH AS BROOKLYN'S BARCADE ARE CAPITALISING ON THE DESIRE TO SEE CHILDHOOD FAVOURITES PRESERVED

This sudden resurgence is, to some degree, a nostalgic one. With their refurbished *Tron, Pac-Man, Asteroids* and *Mario Bros* cabinets (to name but a few), venues such as Brooklyn's Barcade are capitalising on the desire of 20- and 30-somethings to see childhood favourites not only preserved, but enjoyed.

In the UK, meanwhile, what surprises most about the news isn't the mere notion of cabinets turning profits, but rather the suggestion of a trend – a coordinated movement of any kind at all. Arcades in this country have, after all, felt like not-a-lot for a long time. Overawed by consoles and deserted by the people they used to attract, they've been left without aura, identity or reputation (except, maybe, for giving undesirables a shot at other people's pocket change).

Where do people get this impression? From London's Trocadero, mostly, ever the assumed yardstick of industry success. Once a coin-op enthusiast's Mecca, later Sega World and now a more anonymous collection of machines, the West End venue has actually enjoyed its own modest turnaround, at least in terms of bringing order to previous chaos. The latest cabinets sit in neatly ordered rows, arranged largely by genre and, if popular enough, kept apart to grant easy access for crowds of onlookers. And the crowds still gather, in as great a number as they ever have, around some of the best BeMani players in the country. Namco, meanwhile, runs an excellent arcade at its County Hall site, in the shadow of the London Eye.

But is that it? Is the future of our amusement arcades really these mildly impassioned, mildly shambolic cathedrals of old and new machines? If you ask an American, especially one who works in the industry, the answer is emphatically 'no'. "I'm sceptical," admits **Clint Manny**, vice president of GameWorks. "I don't see the traditional arcade as having any legs at all."




Developed by Global VR, *Aliens: Extermination* will strike a chord with players of *Alien 3: The Gun* and *Space Gun*. All three games employ a mounted lightgun, an interface still unique to arcades

METALLICA

While it's no surprise to see videogame cabinets evolving over time, classic mechanical games have also undergone changes. Crane games, for example, have evolved from a simple butter-fingered claw into Japanese 'UFO catchers', adding new skill requirements and robotic features. Flatscreen displays have bumped up the quality of the latest pinball machines, while 'pushers', with their infernal moving shelves and mountains of immovable coins, now feature pachinko-inspired upgrades. Britons will have noticed the arrival of the latest bar-top touchscreen games, with the latest big import being ticket-redemption games that reward play on multiple machines with single, larger prizes. Dubiously titled 'kid vending' machines, meanwhile, have enjoyed phenomenal success in Japan, using collectable cards to offer a more persistent, progressive experience.

Founded as a joint venture between DreamWorks, Sega and Universal in 2001, and now wholly owned by Sega Sammy, GameWorks is a US company built around a vision which Manny describes as "giant warehouses taken over by videogames." In these multi-storey venues, games were to be the focal point and their players championed as 'heroes'. Food, at that early stage in the game, was at best an afterthought: "The idea was that guests would come for the games and hopefully not leave hungry."

But appetites changed. "Over time, we realised that the food was a huge part of this and started building places to handle a decent food business. The concept evolved into a nice-looking casual-dining establishment with entertainment: games, attractions, music, etc. And that's where it currently stands.

"I don't know about the UK, but in the US the signs are very clear. The chains that are growing and prospering are those that have found a formula based on a food *and* entertainment positioning. The food requires upkeep, sanitation and constant investment to keep it viable. The entertainment has to change at a steady rate to keep the 'been there, done that' feeling away."



The arrival of *Need For Speed Underground* in arcades is little surprise given the fortunes of *The Fast And The Furious*. The game uses Global VR Players' Cards to store a personal garage of cars

The migration of arcade cabinets to larger social venues is nothing new, of course, even in this country. A gun game and racing game are as much a surprise in a bowling alley as the combined whiff of rivalry and feet, and there's little doubt among Americans as to where the future lies. It's in AMC Theatres and Brunswick leisure centres. In Dave & Buster's sports cafes, where coin-ops share the floor with conference rooms and shuffleboard courts. And in Chuck E Cheese restaurants, the chain founded by Atari legend Nolan Bushnell, where the dating set consummate their evenings with tabletop games of Hungry Hippos. "The Y generation communicates by word of mouse," remarked American Amusement Machine Association (AAMA) president **Michael Rudowicz** in one interview.

"Food and entertainment should go together," believes Manny. "And that's what GameWorks is. The concept is not an 'arcade', it's an entertainment facility, appealing to many different audiences based upon the products within." Social gaming, then, taken for granted during the '80s and '90s, is today being integrated into a new kind of 'mix-and-mingle' entertainment.

Such gathering of coin-ops beneath a larger umbrella of FECs (Family Entertainment Centres), however, is making nostalgic gamers nervous. Worse than a total loss, they fear a reduction of arcade culture to a mere distraction – an undiscerning novelty to be bought alongside Coke and ciabattas. Moreover, it makes monitoring the specific health of arcade videogames tricky. Much has been made over recent months of the $6 billion US turnover (reported by the AAMA) of out-of-home amusements in 2006, which while a fraction of those seen in the '80s is still an imposing figure, and one indicative of profit. Sceptics, however, claim that it takes into account too many different coin-drop facilities, from cigarette vending machines to football tables, to be particularly informative.

In Japan, at least, industry research paints a clearer, if not necessarily more reassuring, picture. Fact-finding surveys by JAMMA (Japanese Arcade Machine Manufacturers Association) and the AOU (Arcade Operators Union) reveal a more specific upturn in out-of-home videogame revenues, resulting from streamlined business operations, culled loss-makers and a shrewd repositioning of the coin-op scene. Their latest findings, based on the period April 2005-March 2006, report a 10.3 per cent rise in market value over the previous year, and the third rise in succession.





The targeting of games like *The Idolmaster* (a pop music management game) and *Oshare Majo: Love & Berry* (a hybrid party and card-based game) at families and shopping centres has been instrumental, as have initiatives to promote networked and card-based arcade gaming in the Asian territories. As of January 2006, approximately 6,800 *Love & Berry* machines had been installed, and over 100 million of its collectible cards printed. Sega's ALL.net (Amusement Linkage Live Network) infrastructure, meanwhile, has come to connect over 20,000 game boards in 2,600 locations over the last four years.

WHILE THE COLLAPSE OF PACHINKO DEALT WHAT MANY THOUGHT WOULD BE A KNOCKOUT BLOW TO JAPAN'S COIN-OP INDUSTRY, IT IS STARTING TO FIGHT BACK

The consolidation of Japan's long-suffering arcade manufacturers is old news now; Sega Sammy was the first big merger in 2004, Square with Enix and Taito/Bandai Namco coming a year later. While the collapse of pachinko, the game of metal balls favoured by businessmen and the retired, dealt what many assumed to be a knockout blow to an industry already on the ropes, these unions of both business and outlook kept it on its feet. Now, cautiously, it's starting to fight back.

With its extraordinary networked game pods, each with a wraparound screen and simulated robot cockpit, *Mobile Suit Gundam: Bonds Of The Battlefield* ranks among the most extreme attempts at putting Japanese arcade games beyond the reach of consoles, not to mention the wildest imaginations of western gamers. Developed by Bandai Namco and distributed by Banpresto in late 2006, the game's play model is unique: matches average 15 minutes, are played through pods networked across Japan, and draw long queues despite steep prices.

Elsewhere, just as 2005 saw the arrival of Sega's Lindbergh arcade board and its first wave of 360/PS3-quality titles, this year has seen the rekindling of a long-term R&D relationship between Namco and Sony. Titles such as *Tekken 6*, powered by a board based primarily on PS3 architecture, will at the very least secure the industry's reputation as an originator of AAA fighting games and keep its other titles technically fresh.

But where does this leave the UK? Or nascent arcade territories like Russia and the United Arab Emirates? Is it realistic to expect one business model, be it that of Japan or the US, to flourish across countries where societies might differ? "Maybe if Chuck E Cheese had fish-and-chips-flavoured pizza, or if GameWorks had a better selection of warm beers," laughs **Eugene Jarvis**, veteran of Midway, creator of *Robotron: 2084* and founder of Raw Thrills, one of arcade gaming's most powerful new developers. "My guess, though, is that real-estate restrictions are playing a part [in the UK]; there isn't space for some of the megastores we see in the US."

Seen by many as the immediate future of the US arcade scene, Raw Thrills has proved strong competition for the likes of Incredible Technologies, creator of perennial sports bar favourite *Golden Tee*. Despite adding wireless update features and realtime tournament updates with its latest iteration, *Golden Tee Live!*, the prolific casual golf game offers less in terms of depth than a Raw Thrills title like



Both Genki and Bandai Namco have tried bringing *The Fast And The Furious* to console, but it's Raw Thrills' arcade version which is thriving. Coupling the depth of a home title with a coin-op's immediacy, the game has fans among the casual and the hardcore

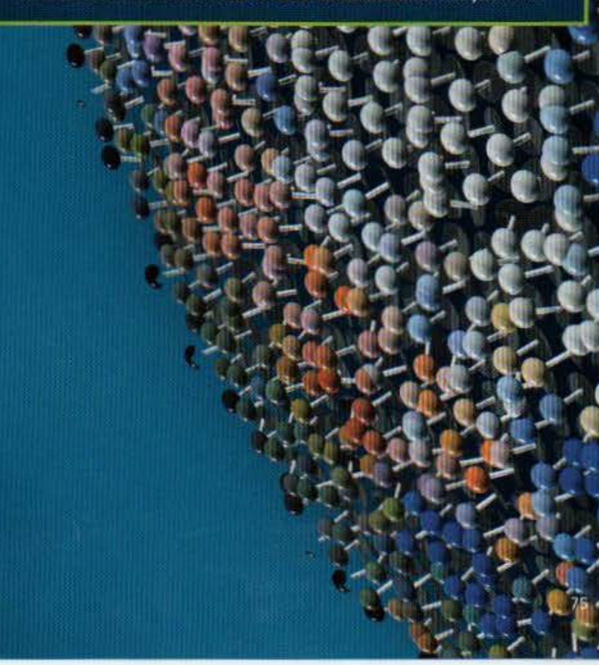
BIG BUCKS

With sales of 7,000 units, *Big Buck Hunter Pro* was last year's arcade champion in the US. The game, built around a national love of shooting animals in the head, has enjoyed remarkable success in its struggling market, attracting large numbers of both casual and hardcore players to its local and national tournaments. A key draw is its value for money, credits buying you several rounds (and bonus rounds) of action, be that gunning for moose or ridding parklands of pesky critters. Unsurprisingly, it's Raw Thrills that has given the game the dimensions required of a killer app, adding simultaneous twoplayer support and a substantial visual overhaul.





Big Buck Hunter Pro is what coin-op makers call a 'simulator-experience title'. Its real-world relevance makes it ideal for social environments such as sports bars



Half-Life 2: Survivor raised eyebrows when it appeared, quite out of the blue, in 2006. Its Type X+ board is just one of many to provide console-quality visuals

The Fast And The Furious or *Super Bikes*. Jarvis' philosophy as a developer continues to be 'easy to learn, tough to master', and his recent games compare surprisingly favourably to their home equivalents.

Something you appreciate when speaking to American insiders is that their businesses and brands, feasible as they might be in a country like Britain, are in no great hurry to give its arcade scene a boost. Whatever the reason for this reluctance to expand, it's not, says **Jim DeRoes**, president of arcade developer Global VR, one of social differences. "Socialisation is at the heart of human nature," he explains. "People everywhere want it, whether it's at a bar, a restaurant, a sporting event, etc. You need to have the right social setting with the right components. I'm not familiar with UK socialisation, but I do hear they all like to gather and have a good time – so maybe it's the environment of their gaming experience [that's the problem]. Really, it's not about finding cultures that accept social gaming, but about finding the right games for each society."

Global VR has been doing its bit in the US by taking distinctly American brands from home platforms into the arcades. A deal with EA has led to coin-op versions of *Madden Football* and *NASCAR*, while Ubisoft has licensed an intensified port of *Far Cry Instincts*, known in arcades as *Paradise Lost*. But where, we ask DeRose, is the appeal in paying for minutes with games that are arguably better at home, where you can play them forever?

"Saying that we just drop an arcade version of the home game into the cabinet is wrong," he argues. "We take the original assets and completely re-develop the game for the needs of the amusement scene, with the pacing and features that casual gamers demand, creating a product that is unique, offering a game experience 'inspired' by the original IP."

Somehow, though, it's hard to imagine that being enough to affect the revival that many are hoping for. For more traditional players,



Another of Global VR's EA-licensed titles, *Madden Arcade* again uses Players' Card technology to retain those all-important career statistics and rosters. And, like the home console series, it's already churning out the updates, the latest being *Madden Season 2*









The POD (Panoramic Optical Display) cabinet built for *Gundam: Bonds Of The Battlefield* brings to mind the R-360 cabinet of *G-LOC: Air Battle*. While its movements are limited in comparison, its attempt to provide a wholly unique arcade experience is not

PLAYING CATCH-UP

As symbolic gestures go, nothing screams arcade revival like the return of *Chase HQ*. A product of Taito's merger with Square Enix, *Chase HQ: An Urgent Call From Nancy* joins *OutRun 2* and *Afterburner Climax* in uncorking some vintage coin-op IP. Unfortunately, it does little to remind console owners what they're missing. The battle racing formula has hardly stayed loyal to the arcades, the new game bearing more than a slight resemblance to *Burnout 3*. With arcade technology under close scrutiny, games like this and *Silent Hill: Arcade*, a basic shooter with filtered, foggy graphics, risk seeming counterproductive. Better to have a game like *OutRun 2*, which prior to its arrival on Xbox saw the phrase 'arcade perfect port' bandied about for the first time in years.



The visuals are as noisy as in Konami's home series, as are the tight draw distance and heavy fog, but *Silent Hill: Arcade* is a strange choice for coin-op conversion

"WE KEEP HEARING THAT THE ARCADE IS DEAD, BUT WE CONTINUE TO SEE PS3 AND XBOX 360 LICENSING PORTS OF POPULAR ARCADE FIGHTERS"

who lament the days of ash-encrusted JAMMA cabs and pockets heaving with ten-pence pieces, ports and licensed IPs are part of the problem rather than the solution. To many, the social implications of tomorrow's arcades are trivial next to their unanswered decline as a creative force. Whether you blame the copycat influence of *Street Fighter II*, the inflated price of hi-tech hardware or the devastating arrival of Sony's PlayStation, there's little debate over the arcade industry's biggest loss: its status as the crucible of gaming.

And a game like Sega's *2 Spicy*, which attempts to derail the lightgun genre by offering basic movement controls and competitive multiplayer, isn't going to change that. From console-equipped living rooms connected to XBLA and PSN, home gamers can be excused for seeing little in the arcade scene beyond the generic and the familiar. The disbelief over *After Burner Climax*'s exclusivity says everything about the assumed uniqueness of the arcade experience: no one could believe it wasn't headed post haste to either 360 or PS3, where somebody might actually play it.

This lack of software innovation, says Jarvis, isn't for lack of trying. "We've all been trying to come up with fresh meat like the next *Tetris* or *Pac-Man*," he insists. "But after 20 years of lean times, the guy sitting next to you starts looking tasty [laughs]. With that in mind, there aren't so many of us cannibals left now. The stagnation is slowing , at least, thanks to this drive towards the 'unique experience' of arcade gaming.

"The environment is now a major factor in shaping people's enjoyment criteria. The way I see it, people are looking for the arcades to do something akin to what the iPod did for music – they want something simple and widely relevant. Casual gamers are frustrated by the 12 menus you have to navigate just to play console game level one. You're faced with these interfaces and you just want to throw the controller through the screen."

On that note, what does Jarvis make of Nintendo's Wii, an ominous attempt to bring unique control experiences into the home? His tone, as in previous interviews, is dismissive. "Nintendo really got that one right," he says. "And it's amazing how the 90 per cent of people who aren't gamers are suddenly discovering the fun of it. But let's set the record straight here. The Wii has the most intuitive console controller ever, but like so many general-purpose simulation devices it pales when stacked up against the real thing – a force-feedback steering wheel and foot pedals, for example."

DeRose, likewise, isn't clearing his desk just yet. "We keep hearing that the arcade is dead, but we continue to see PS3 and Xbox 360 licensing ports of popular arcade fighters. It is a cyclical market and I have a feeling amusement is in the ascendancy; players who grew up with home consoles are now rediscovering the arcade thrill."



Originally titled *Far Cry: Paradise Lost*, Global VR's port of a port has since lost the prefix. With its seat and mounted gun it finds a middleground between the arcade and console

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

BioShock



OK, so it's not as great as everyone had hoped it'd be, but that's not to say Rapture isn't a place that deserves to be revisited – especially from a different perspective.
360, PC, 2K GAMES

Ouendan 2



There's something to be said for a game that enables you to maintain a sunny disposition with customs officials after a fraught nine-hour flight on a toddler-infested plane.
DS, NINTENDO

Scrabulous



Yes, we know it's on *that* website, and that we should be working, but simple wordgames, as Dr Kawashima shows, can keep you alert and thinking. Honest, boss.
ONLINE

Following on
How sequels are trailblazing new ideas



Project Gotham Racing 3's photo mode is one spark behind the trend of allowing players to share media which shows off their skills. *PGR4*'s ability to browse and vote on other players' shots and, now, replay videos is the natural extension of this

Those with only cursory a knowledge of the games we've reviewed this month might be excused for feeling a little depressed at the heavy presence of multiple sequels.

But though it's natural to assume that the likes of *Persona 3*, *Halo 3*, *Metroid Prime 3*, *PGR4* and *SingStar* might indicate a lack of fresh ideas, each manages the opposite. *Persona 3* twists the JRPG into a high-school drama; *Metroid Prime 3* implements a brilliantly executed new control scheme.

It's *SingStar*, *Halo 3* and *PGR4* that demonstrate the freshest approaches. At heart they're faithful franchise updates, but also feature online interaction that goes beyond friends lists and multiplayer. By allowing their players to share screenshots and replay videos of their in-game exploits they've opened up opportunities for showcasing talent, humour and ingenuity as well as competitiveness.

Each is the result of careful observation of their players. Knowing how much *Halo* players love to explore its levels and try to break them, Bungie created Forge, a *Halo 3* playground that gives users fantastic freedom to mess about with the game's physics and geometry, and a way of recording their exploits for posterity. Bizarre knows just how much *PGR* players love toying with its cars, and, having formalised in *PGR3* the fan-invented cat'n'mouse race type, *PGR4* now requires players to co-operate to win an Achievement for which eight cars must be airborne at once. And, after PS2 *SingStar* players began posting YouTube files showcasing their sessions, Sony's London Studio realised that video playback just had to be a feature on PS3.

There are many great things about the way these games are developing their social sides and demonstrating broader appeal. Instead of enforcing the need to win within the rules, they endorse inventive play and performance – a chance to show off.

They're also indicative of the fact that the current generation is maturing. These games aren't just about proving the computational power of their host technologies, they're showing that deep consideration of the way games are played, along with subtler use of technology, can do so much to enrich videogames as an interactive medium.





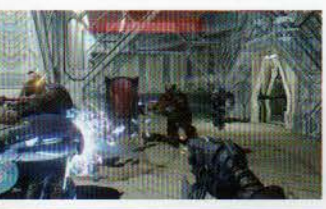
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



HALO 3

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BUNGIE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177







Though never playable in singleplayer, the Arbiter is a frequent ally, and even the most hostile players should have a warm affection for him by the end of the game. Like all Elites, his formal, portentous utterings are wonderfully written and delivered, on a knife-edge between parody and poetry

Never before has a videogame been so confidently, so loudly touted as an event. The world's richest man threatened to deploy it in a corporate smackdown. His Xbox chief called it the entertainment release of the year, predicting it would flatten the toughest heavyweights Hollywood had to offer. Ten months before it was due, it was advertised on national US television; four months before, it was previewed to hundreds of thousands of players in a month-long multiplayer beta. *Halo 3*, we were told in no uncertain terms, was it. The daddy. The big one.

Neither has a videogame ever been so sure of itself. *Halo 3* makes its entrance with all the cocksure swagger of its hero Master Chief. It knows it's an event, and every butch line of dialogue, every stirring swell of the score, every sweeping view, artful reveal and blunt reversal is wrung dry for excitement as it builds itself up yet further. It is the ultimate, chest-beating alpha game. It has an awful lot of bragging to live up to.

Does it deliver? Does it ever. Where *Halo 2* got lost, *Halo 3* starts out small, keeps it simple, and then just builds and builds and builds into an unstoppable steamroller of sci-fi action. Every time you think it can't possibly top its own intensity, audacity and sheer scale, it outdoes itself, until it closes the trilogy with a climax that, in a very real sense, tears the house down.



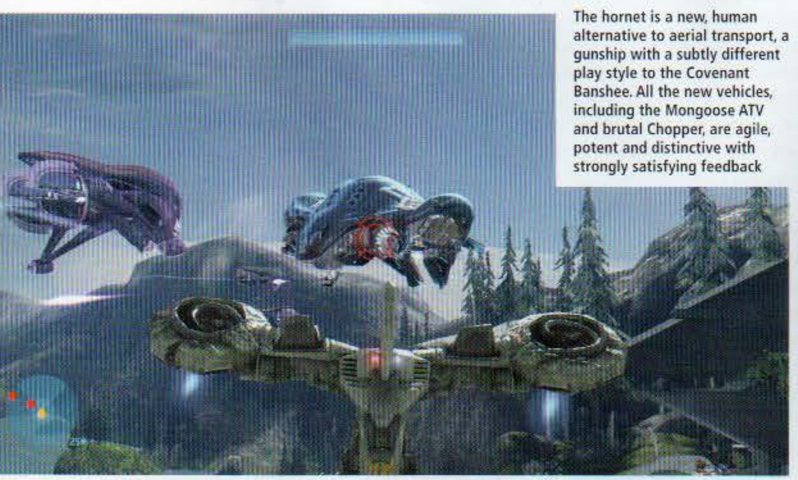
Halo 3 starts out small, keeps it simple, and then just builds and builds and builds into an unstoppable action steamroller



Halo 3 will silence those critics who dismissed its looks as 'HD *Halo 2*' after the beta-test version. It's never less than arresting, and can often be simply astonishing to behold. From the lustrous and painfully detailed surfaces to the airbrushed, painterly quality of the big vistas, this is classic sci-fi art come to thundering, rampaging life

It's the most consistently accomplished *Halo* campaign to date, but it's not long – nine chapters, some of them brief, some of them sprawling – and it's not that new, either. *Halo 3* is so rife with quotes from and tributes to the first game, especially in its latter stages, that at times it feels almost like a remake. The shape and tone of entire *Halo* levels have been reconstructed, but on the grandest scale – especially in the numerous, glorious orgies of freeform vehicular carnage.

You can't blame Bungie: it's not like *Combat Evolved* doesn't have memorable moments to spare. And to be fair, *Halo 3* adds more of its own than the second game ever did, and is also far more successful at giving each of its chapters an iconic, thrilling identity. The African sequence that forms the game's first half is an atmospheric and beautifully paced progression, from tangled jungle to claustrophobic bunker to ruined savannah and, finally, a battlefront on the brink of a spectacular abyss.



The hornet is a new, human alternative to aerial transport, a gunship with a subtly different play style to the Covenant Banshee. All the new vehicles, including the Mongoose ATV and brutal Chopper, are agile, potent and distinctive with strongly satisfying feedback



Later on, the one-two punch of The Ark and The Covenant is destined to be spoken of in the same reverential tones reserved for Truth and Reconciliation and Silent Cartographer. On the other hand, one late level, Cortana, will attract the bile previously aimed at Library – in terms of frustration, though thankfully not repetition – but the fact is that a *Halo* game wouldn't feel half as cathartic and heroic if you weren't required to survive one gruelling ordeal.

As a story, *Halo 3* is undiluted, shamelessly populist space-opera hokum, and frequently it's just nonsense. It's less bogged down in political intrigue than its predecessor, though, and told with such relish, such conviction, such cavalier disregard for any form of restraint, that it's a pleasure to be swept up in. There is no shock on the scale of *Halo 2*'s Arbiter moment (and no attempt to shift the focus off Master Chief for one second), although some eyebrows will be raised at the game's touchingly absurd stab at a love story.

The more important script in *Halo 3* is that which drives the AI, however. The overhauled Brutes are definitely worthier opponents now – the first encounter with a tight-knit group of them will be a humbling moment for many players. As you blow away their armour and provoke them from military caution into insane rage, the sense that each enemy is an individual is even stronger than it was with Elites. The power structures and group tactics of the various Covenant races are a wonder to behold and fight, and are highlighted with vocal feedback that far surpasses what was already the best chatter in videogames.

The armoury is a relatively modest evolution of *Halo 2*'s. New additions are kept to showy novelties – the very gratifying gravity hammer and Spartan laser – or to copying weapon types from one faction to another (most human weapons now have an alien equivalent, and vice versa). There are sound multiplayer reasons for this, but it's hard not to long for *Halo*'s line-up, where every gun had a distinct personality

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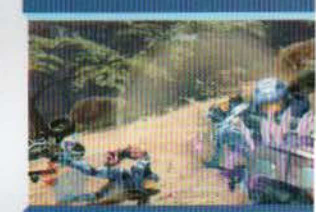






"They are more fun to fight than Elites!" quips a marine after the first big Brute encounter. The chatter isn't just bursting with the traditional atmosphere and self-aware jokes, it provides tremendous information on the enemy's position and tactical intent as Brutes bark out orders to their underlings

Gadget inspector



There's barely enough opportunity, in the course of one run through the campaign, to explore the potential of all the imaginative, audacious and well-implemented equipment (the bubble shield, flare, portable cover, energy drain and booster, gravity lift, auto-turret and so on). Nearly all the devices are excellent examples of Bungie's willingness to execute outlandish and potentially game-breaking ideas in the name of exciting and entertaining players, and more miraculously, to get it right. For the most part equipment blows tactical options wide open while leaving balance undisturbed, and toying with it will be one of the many things that give *Halo 3* the longest of legs. Just another of the many ways in which this game frees you to do what you want, when you want.





The increased openness of the levels' design expands freedom and spectacle, but not so much as to divert from the Master Chief's headlong charge, or in any way dissipate its momentum. The game is frequently punctuated with set-pieces set in wide arenas, such as this confrontation with a Scarab on The Storm that stamps all over the Scarab encounter in the previous game











and strength. It's also a little easier to get caught up in the inventory anxiety the first game very nearly banished. Weapon balance has been well sorted, though, with dual-wielding less overpowering and the trusty assault rifle beefed up to its former guts and glory. And if the weapons don't shake things up, the new equipment certainly does.



Bungie has intensified the ruthless pace and joyous extravagance of its game to scarcely believable heights

Detachable turrets provide tremendous firepower, but slow you down; there's seldom a reason not to grab one for easy kills. They're almost more important as a visual signature, giving plenty of opportunities to identify with the Spartans and Elites in thirdperson and close-up



Not that Halo multiplayer needed shaking up; there's a reason *Halo 2* has ruled Xbox Live for three years straight now, and it must have seemed unwise to rewrite it, so Bungie hasn't. It's generous with new maps, most of which have the series' traditional (and very rare in other games) combination of depth and detail with simple, intuitive architecture. The bravest, the immense Sandtrap, is also the best.

The controls are improved, the tactical options multiplied, even more so the opportunities for cruelty, hilarity and happy accident. Unafraid to add slapstick elements such as the man cannon, Bungie has intensified the ruthless pace and joyous extravagance of its game to scarcely believable heights, and a five-hour session will feel like five minutes.

In solo campaign and multiplayer matches alike, *Halo 3* is, unlike both its predecessors, polished to absolute perfection. It may not move these modes far forward, but it knocks them into the best shape they've ever seen, and updates their vibrant visuals in a bold, hyper-real style that elicits gasp after gasp. Bungie's talents could have left it there and been rightly satisfied that they'd made the best *Halo* to date, if not the freshest. But, being Bungie, they had to go one step further.

And *Halo 3*'s vision and deep, daring ambition are to be found elsewhere, too. They're in the Forge map editor, the replay theatre and the co-operative campaign. Over and above that, they're in the philosophy, the engineering, the game's infrastructure, the community support and the sheer commitment that lays behind these modes, and the way they're unified with the game at the most fundamental of levels.

As map editors go, Forge is fairly basic, only really allowing you to distribute items and furniture and alter a few basic rules. Its genius is to allow eight players to edit and play it as a regular game of *Halo* simultaneously, transforming it into an immediate and flexible mix of sandpit, physics lab, sports arena and theatrical stage. The replay theatre, again, is actually quite limited – lacking editing tools beyond the ability to record clips on the fly – but





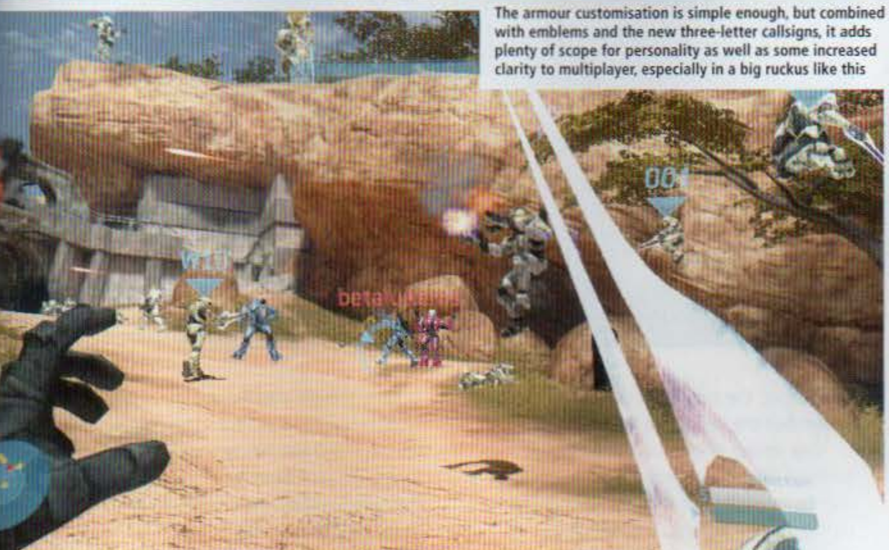


Four of the nine levels feature very extensive vehicular sections; you will spend huge chunks of the game in the driving seat, hardly surprising given the tactile handling and the rambunctious, unpredictable action









The armour customisation is simple enough, but combined with emblems and the new three-letter callsigns, it adds plenty of scope for personality as well as some increased clarity to multiplayer, especially in a big ruckus like this



The wide-open dunes and bases of Sandtrap are a perfect arena for vehicle combat in multiplayer. The giant, turret-toting moving bases of the Elephants – which serve as flag locations in CTF – add a vastly entertaining dynamic

amazing in its seamless integration with and support for every other mode of the game, including Forge and campaign, not to mention multiplayer screenings and free hosting for every player on bungie.net. The co-op (see 'Four's company') is even better, so far ahead of any peer in terms of features and scope that it probably won't be equalled for years.

The total lack of compromise in each and every single detail is breathtaking. Everything works with precision, everything is set up the same way, every barrier within reason has been lifted, and you never need to do any of it alone. *Halo 3* was built to be used, built to be shared, built to be loved and built to last. It's a safe bet that it will still be enjoyed by a thriving community years from now. In substance it's nothing new, merely a magnificent, beautiful monster of an FPS sequel. In concept and execution, though, *Halo 3* is the future. **[10]**

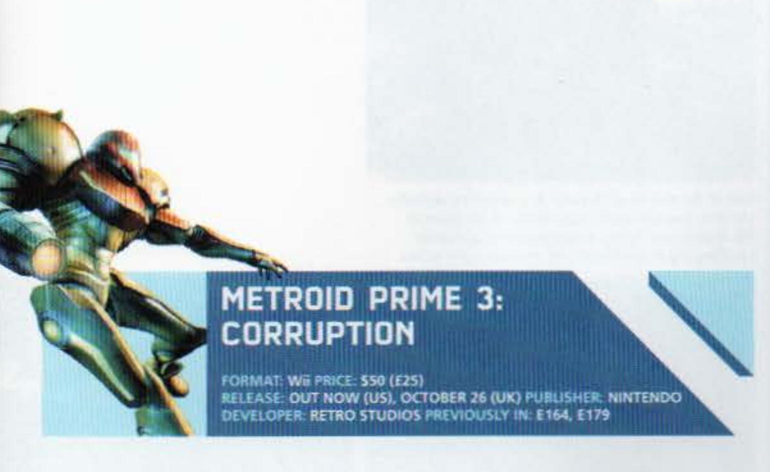


Capturing moments like this, and the aftermath of a well-aimed grenade, on video or in a screenshot is bound to become a time-consuming obsession on a par with actually playing the game itself. Given the opportunity to pause and study the game from any angle across entire maps using the built-in replay mode, you'll only become more awed at its incredible scale, detail and liveliness

Four's company



They saved the best for last: it's been only a short time since Bungie confirmed that its net code could handle fourplayer, online co-op, but the mode (tested with three players over System Link) couldn't be further from an afterthought. It's the key to this short game's extremely long shelf-life. Not only does the generous player-cap rewrite the entire experience and open Legendary difficulty to all-comers, but the hidden skulls unlock settings with tremendous power to customise the game and increase its difficulty (from upgrading enemy units to causing grunts to die in puffs of confetti and balloons). There's an optional scoring system that awards style points for kills, and includes a chain multiplier that decreases with time, quantifying your performance and turning co-op *Halo 3* into a brute of a score-attack game that can keep on giving even after its hardest setting has been defeated.

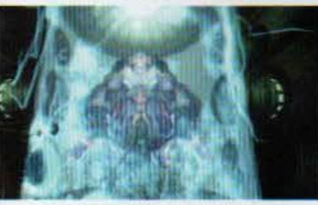


METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: $50 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), OCTOBER 26 (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RETRO STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E179







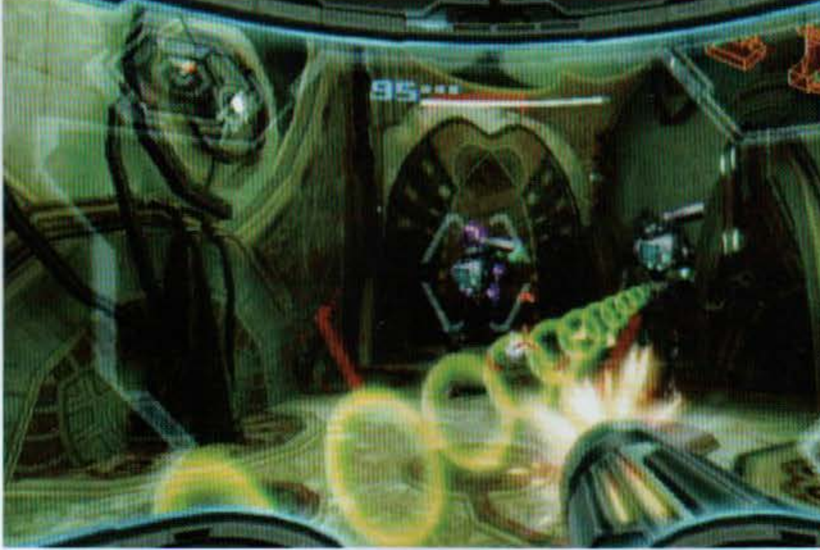


This Wii entry doesn't make many notable graphical advances over its GameCube predecessors; just as well that they were stunning-looking games that have refused to date. Technically hard to fault, *Corruption*'s graphics stand or fall on the art – when it's good, it's gorgeous

It seems odd to describe *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* as a grower. It is, after all, the third game in a trilogy that began five years ago, itself part of a 20-year-old series. There's plenty in it that's novel, but nothing radical, and it has a much-loved, rich tradition on which to rest. You ought to slot into it like a morph ball into a waiting cradle. *Metroid*'s naturally slow-burning rhythm aside, this is not a game you expect to take its time worming its way into your affections.

Yet that's just what it ends up doing. *Corruption* spends near half its length recovering from an opening so badly misjudged that you fear developer Retro has forgotten everything that makes *Metroid* special and run dry of all inspiration. Although it does recover, that's a fear that you never quite manage to shake.

Fortunately this has nothing to do with Retro's primary mission from Nintendo HQ – to perfect firstperson controls on the Wii. In that respect, *Corruption* is more than exemplary. The various sensitivity settings are expertly calibrated, and the crosshairs' shift from free movement to dragging the view is exquisitely smooth and progressive in all of them. The pointer is so fast and precise that, with practice, you'll find yourself turning, looking and aiming almost independently of each other, the crosshairs darting around the screen but the viewpoint tracking stably.



One stroke of genius was to retain *Metroid Prime*'s notoriously divisive lock-on trigger, even though it might be said to have outlived its usefulness. It allows you to fix your perspective (on an enemy or, if not locked on, straight ahead) and move the crosshair around it with the hair-trigger speed of a lightgun. Dealing with multiple small targets is gratifyingly swift and precise, and Retro has exploited this well, peppering the game with opportunities for quickfire target practice, from switches to boss fights.

> The sensitivity settings are expertly calibrated, and the crosshairs' shift from free movement to dragging the view is exquisitely smooth

Around this inspired scheme, Retro has constructed hundreds of little moments of what you might call control colour – the effectively pointless but totally compelling little physical rituals that Nintendo has become addicted to on its new machines (both recent *Zeldas*, and the DS's *Phantom Hourglass* especially, being prime examples). Throw and yank the grappling beam, push the buttons of a keypad, twist, pull and push elaborate mechanical locks, trace a welding beam around a shattered circuit board: using the motion sensing of both Nunchuck and Remote, *Corruption* fetishises every movement, every beep and clunk of these mechanical interactions. They bring nothing to the gameplay, but everything to the game: they're pure sci-fi, pure atmosphere, pure *Metroid*.

You'll be grateful for every one of those moments, because to begin with, pure *Metroid* is something that's in short supply. It's hard to describe just how disorientingly, depressingly wrong the first few hours of *Corruption* are. Aboard a Federation starship, and then down on the surface of the planet Norion, Samus finds herself surrounded by Federation troopers in the midst of staged, cinematic skirmishes with Space Pirates. She collaborates with a motley team of fellow bounty hunters who look like B-list X-Men. She even wanders busy corridors, talking to NPCs. Story is doled out in huge gobbets of cutscene and bad, disjointed dialogue. For all



Five years on, and *Metroid Prime*'s firstperson platforming has still to be bettered. Samus' steady gait, weight and inertia, and the sense of a solid connection with the ground, make most jumps second nature





Hypermode and Command visor aside, the suit upgrades follow a fairly well-worn path of plasma cannon, boost ball, screw attack and so on. The multiple-lock homing-missile launcher is the only variant that seems tailored to the new controller



Debate will rage forever over whether the *Metroid Prime* scan visor dumbed down the series or was a masterstroke for accessibility and player involvement. In truth, it can be a bit of both: even with it *Corruption* will still occasionally confound you – and rightly so

the world, the beginning of *Corruption* feels like a clumsy remake of the first level of *Halo* mixed with a cheap movie licence. The awesome loneliness and creeping fear of the introductions to the first *Prime* or *Super Metroid* are nowhere to be felt.

They don't really resurface on the stereotypical and lurid 'fire planet' of Bryyo either, despite the fact that the exploration is more conventionally languid and lonesome there. Overwrought architecture and overly restrictive, linear, A-to-B-to-A backtracking bludgeon out most of the mood and the organic progression that distinguish the best *Metroid* games. That's to say nothing of the marathon boss encounters (a signature part of the series, but of *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* in particular) that swing from the dramatically inspired to the monolithically tedious, sometimes in the space of the same attack pattern.

Developing the plot arc and arcane lore of the *Prime* series seems to have been more important to Retro than evolving the true story of every *Metroid* – Samus' suit, visor and weapon upgrades. The grandstanding command visor that allows remote control of your gunship for bombing and heavy lifting is of extremely limited use. The only other major addition, Hypermode – in which Samus consumes her own health to enter a destructive, unstable, Phazon-fuelled frenzy – does add an interesting risk dynamic to firefights, but inevitably throws many encounters off balance, making them too easy in Hypermode, and too hard (or too boring) out of it. Otherwise, it's very solid business as usual, and there's no sign of the advances those excellent shooter controls are begging for: decent enemy AI and some occasional combat-geared map design.

It's only once you move to Skytown, an achingly beautiful steampunk city flying above a turbulent gas giant, that *Corruption* starts to get under your skin. The aerial ziplines between buildings may strike an unfamiliar note of on-rails showboating, but it's actually at this point that the game opens up, and you start to use Samus' power-ups to explore several worlds on several fronts. Then and only then does the hypnotic spell of classic *Metroid* take hold, and for the rest of the game – as you move on to the oppressive Pirate homeworld and the tangled wrecks of destroyed Federation ships; as the Metroids themselves make their belated and inescapably terrifying appearance – you're happily trapped in its intricate, mechanical web, alone with its ancient mysteries.

Masterful controls aside, *Corruption* sees Retro lost for a while, like Samus, down some mystifying and convoluted dead-end of its own making, populating a universe that should have stayed desolate and dead. Eventually it does emerge as a substantial and beautifully engineered adventure, a worthy and welcome Wii blockbuster. But as the conclusion of a trilogy that started so brilliantly, it can't help but disappoint. **[7]**

Swap shop



Corruption's extras – audio tracks, artwork and the like – are unlocked by shelling out a currency of medals, awarded for scanning, defeating bosses, completing missions, discovering new areas and reaching certain kill counts. The system shows some influence from Xbox 360 Achievements, but its most interesting aspect is distinctively Nintendo. To gain access to the stranger and more appealing extras (ship decals, dioramas and more) you must swap the 'friend vouchers' earned from some feats for medals with other players of the game on your friends list. Socialising even this most resolutely singleplayer of games might be read as a sign of the times, but then again, the trading network as a tool for completion (and viral marketing) was pioneered by *Pokémon*.



The bizarre, mismatched and rather out-of-place bounty hunters that assist Samus early in the game inevitably turn rogue and feature as minor bosses later in the game, as does Dark Samus. Like the other boss encounters, their difficulty can be somewhat haphazard







Corruption benefits from the superb atmospheric flourishes Retro brought to the first *Prime* (albeit with less economy and flair) – effects like mist and Samus' reflected eyes, and the lonely echo of her footsteps



PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 4

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: OCTOBER 12 PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS PREVIOUSLY IN: E180



The bike stunts look rather cheesy, and not all players will be comfortable with their slightly crass showboating in a game series noted for its class. But they present an interesting and demanding reversal of *PGR*'s scoring dynamic, with the focus on straights rather than corners



The four new cities and one test track offer such mouthwatering driving that they put *PGR4*'s track selection on a par with the inspiring *PGR2*. Macau and Shanghai have some blistering high-speed cornering, St Petersburg offers treacherous bumps and wide boulevards, and Quebec's old-town twists and swoops recall Edinburgh at its best



There's a simple paint editor that doesn't stray anywhere near *Forza*'s turf, but allows you to customise all your vehicles with a cut-and-paste livery if you want to stand out. You'll also need to select a nationality, so Bizarre can foster a spirit of (we hope) healthy international rivalry

In *PGR3*, life began at 170mph. In *PGR4* it doesn't, but Kudos does. Reach the magic speed and the style-point meter in the centre of the screen starts to tick round, accumulating Kudos faster and faster as you hurtle towards 200mph and that brutal right-hander at the end of the straight. At 100 it awards a star, at 200 another. Brake late, turn in, touch the handbrake to initiate a drift, anything to keep that meter ticking: three stars, four. Another corner presents itself, and an opportunity to keep it clean this time, nail the car to the apex, take a bite of kerb on the way out, scrape the barrier and wait a heart-stopping second for the combo to register… five stars, 500 Kudos, wild cheers over the howl of your engine.

Ever since Bizarre invented Kudos for *Project Gotham*'s precursor, *Metropolis Street Racer* on the Dreamcast, there's been an inherent, unresolvable tension in the series. Kudos encouraged seat-of-the-pants style, but the semi-realistic handling and demanding course design promoted much more technical, purist racing. It's seldom been to the detriment of these excellent racing games, and indeed *PGR2* achieved a fine synthesis of the two, but *3* in particular felt like it was being pulled in two directions at once, and the hardcore driving game was winning.



From the cars to the Kudos, PGR4 has one thing in more abundance than any of its predecessors, or any other real-world driving game: personality



Bizarre, though, was having none of it. The sweeping revisions to Kudos in *PGR4* – and the subtler, but no less important adjustments to handling – swing it quite dramatically the other way, at a critical moment in the series' history. *Gotham*, a launch title for Xbox, Live and 360, has always been the bride, but in 2007 it suddenly finds itself the bridesmaid, trailing behind its dauntingly comprehensive stablemate sim, *Forza Motorsport 2*. That kind of pressure was only ever going to push the inveterate score addicts at Bizarre one way, and *PGR4* sees them boldly staking out the arcade-shaped ground.

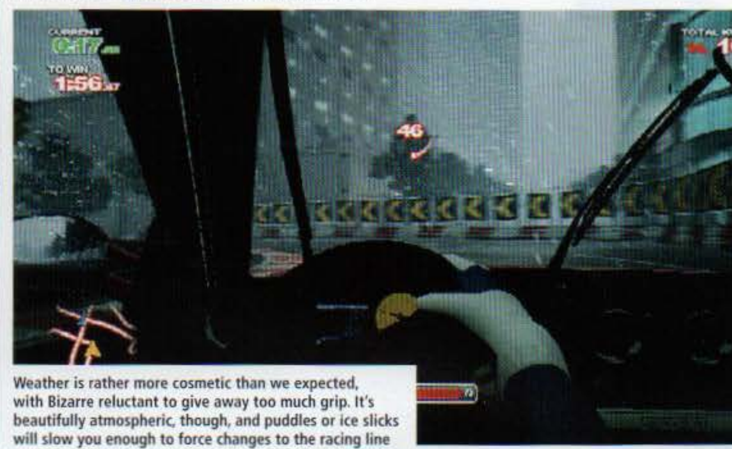
So keen is the Liverpool developer to set *PGR4* apart that it has positively showered it in revisions and new features. Alongside the Kudos star system and four new cities, career mode has been reworked from scratch, the game's general structure and progression are substantially overhauled, there are multiple new gametypes in single and multiplayer, a







The existing tracks from New York, London, Tokyo and Las Vegas have been reworked, with barriers and kerbs moved to create larger run-off areas and generally make for more forgiving, smooth and interesting cornering



Weather is rather more cosmetic than we expected, with Bizarre reluctant to give away too much grip. It's beautifully atmospheric, though, and puddles or ice slicks will slow you enough to force changes to the racing line

profoundly impressive graphical upgrade, weather effects, and of course the controversial introduction of motorbikes. It's almost too much, almost desperate, as if Bizarre has tied itself up in knots making changes for the sake of it, and in the process lost all sight of the streamlined simplicity that made *PGR3* such an easy pleasure. In time, though, you'll come to appreciate every single one of them.

The star system, introduction of high-speed Kudos, and return of Kudos for fast, clean cornering make the score system far more constant and consistent in its rewards, far more tangible and addictive. So much so that Bizarre has been able to sever the long-held link between cone and style challenges and split them into distinct, multi-threaded and technically deep disciplines of their own. The shift is well served by the car handling, which wisely retreats in the face of *Forza 2*'s staggering realism: it's still credible, but it's surprisingly grippy and forgiving, with very fast and precise turn-in, a fraction less physical feedback, a fraction more control, and extremely clear definition of grip.

The bikes are more of a mixed bag. Initially they seem twitchy and weightless, a long way off *MotoGP*'s precise perfection of the form. It's not until you put some miles in on higher classes and faster tracks that you learn to steer with the throttle and start to appreciate their capabilities, but you'll still need to suspend your disbelief at how absurdly resilient they are to contact and crashes. That's an unavoidable requirement of balancing the game properly, as is the imperfect but intriguing stunt system, intended to even out the Kudos. If you don't get on with bikes, the game doesn't require you to use them often, only sometimes.



Traditional *Gotham* – an open choice of quick-fire, one-shot events with medal rewards from tin to platinum – has been sidelined to a brief but satisfying Arcade mode in *PGR4*. Instead, the career follows a rotating calendar of tournaments and one-off invitationals, following geographical and meteorological themes. On the face of it, it's convoluted and prescriptive. But the immense variety and imagination of the event and track design – not to mention the vehicles, locations and weather conditions – make it a delightful tour of *PGR4*'s innumerable pleasures. Every month holds surprises, from a suspenseful knockout time-attack series in night-time Shanghai to a drift challenge on Quebec's icy hairpins. Furthermore, the entirely Kudos-based scoring for career tournaments brings *PGR*'s unique selling point right back into the heart of the game.

From the terrific new cities to the splendidly exotic and broad selection of cars,



PGR4's garage replaces *3*'s concentration on speed with an equally unwavering dedication to style and cachet. Supercars and track specials mix with important classics, ultra-rare exotica, historic race cars and even a truck

from the drama and cunning of the event design to the reinstitution of Kudos at its core, from the bike stunts to the brilliant soundtrack, *PGR4* has one thing in more abundance than any of its predecessors, or any other real-world driving game: personality. It has the potential to be the first *PGR* to end up misunderstood, underrated and overlooked, but it's also bound to foster an even more devoted cult, especially online. It's uncompromising and involved and may not be for everyone, but you sense it's the game Bizarre has been meaning to make for the last seven years, and for that alone, it's precious. **[9]**



Achievement unhinged

PGR3's Achievements are still some of the most imaginative on 360, but with *PGR4* Bizarre has really excelled itself for wit and variety. Gamer points are doled out for such tortuous feats such as performing a hot lap without touching the brakes, or knocking the wing-mirrors off all eight opponents in a race. Even better are the collaborative multiplayer ones that pay tribute to the *PGR* community's mischievous spirit (get two bikes facing each other, 15m apart, with each performing an impressive endo; get eight vehicles in the air at the same time; win first and second in splitscreen, against an AI opponent, in reverse). Most intriguingly of all, there are three puzzle achievements, with no guide to completion but their cryptic titles. Few developers' commitment to play beyond the base framework of the game is so broad and demonstrable.



ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £45 (360), £35 (PC)
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 28 (PC) PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NERVE/SPLASH DAMAGE PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E164

It's all in the context



ETQW's contextual mission system is a remarkably smart piece of game design. It allows players to generate missions for others – by spotting enemy vehicles or emplacements – and also provides a basic set of missions based around what the game judges a team might need in any given situation. This means that if a player follows the mission waypoints he'll always been contributing to the overall good of the team, and usually doing what is best for his character. It's a great way to curb selfish play, but also a potent tool for quickly bringing beginners into the battle.

One of the off features of *Quake Wars* is that narrative spoilers are a genuine possibility. That seems peculiar when you realise that this is a *Battlefield*-styled multiplayer combat game, but the fact remains: each of its four campaigns tells a story, and the maps themselves are made up of a sequence of events which, at least for the first time you play them, sometimes deliver genuine surprises. No other combat game has maps this lavish, or ambitiously designed.

ETQW's most unusual feature is that all its maps, and therefore all its battles, are asymmetric. One side has a number of assault objectives against which the other must defend. This means that one side is generally falling back, trying to stave off the inevitable or waiting for the timer to run down. The objectives are wildly varied – from blowing up generators to activating giant mining lasers, through blasting down armoured doorways and driving giant vehicles to set up forward attack positions. The frontline moves across the battlefield as the fight progresses and the nature of the combat changes as the two sides move from open vehicular conflict to sticky close-quarters engagements.

What this asymmetric design means, however, is that there's no chance of one side clawing back victory from the brink of defeat. They're simply stopping the attacking side achieving their goal, as you might in *Unreal Tournament*'s assault missions. This means the game is something of an acquired taste. While there will be comparisons with both *Quake* and the *Battlefield* games, *ETQW* is really a successor to *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*'s class-based multiplayer, and particularly the *Enemy Territory* expansion that Splash Damage designed for it, under id's supervision. This fact alone explains the odd timbre of the action and the way in which it mixes deathmatch with option-rich class-based conflict. It also explains its pedigree as a multiplayer combat game: it was a game made by people who grew up playing these games, and who have dwelled on little else. (Most members of the Bromley-based studio have been recruited from the best FPS mod teams across Europe.)

There are plenty of vehicles, but the focus is definitely on infantry; many maps shift to interior battles towards the end of the objectives. The two sides manage to be qualitatively different to play while also being well balanced in the overall struggle to attack and defend

As a result there are many things in *ETQW* which are simply flawless: the HUD design gives you all the information you could need, while the context-based mission system (see 'It's all in the context') and communication shortcuts are instantly accessible, even to those just starting out with the game. Each of the classes gives you distinct and esoteric equipment (remote-controlled flying drones, air-dropped artillery and instant disguises being some of the highlights) and the feeling that you can develop quite complex tactics, especially in an organised team game. The three-map campaign structure, meanwhile, means that you can experiment with unlocked weapon content without having to play a single class for weeks on end.

The vehicles too have been extraordinarily well-realised, never unbalancing the core infantry conflict, and not having any flight-ace demands on player skill. This isn't a game where your experiments with flying will result in endless crashes, as they seem to whenever a helicopter is involved in other games.

ETQW will not please everyone, but the mixture of fast-paced fighting and wide-open options for playing styles is unquestionably a potent one. It's certainly a shame that it's going to have to compete with *Team Fortress 2* (also on 360 and PC) for players' attentions. **[8]**



The engine is a tweaked version of that used for _Quake 4_, but also uses some of the megatexture landscape technology of id's next game, _Rage_





Sega Rally is nearly all about cornering, but the old *Gran Turismo* gambit of ricocheting off other vehicles remains the best way to get around bends



SEGA RALLY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 (360, PS3), £30 (PC)
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 28 PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA RACING STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

Sega Rally is like a much-loved car that's just a few years too old: it feels instantly comfortable, great on the road, and you know that if you crash into one of those smaller new models you'll be the one walking away from your sturdier carriage unscathed. The problem is, it's just not that sexy any more.

But that doesn't mean it's not good looking. The game is built around signature Sega moments where, for example, as you screech round a hairpin bend and accelerate up the side of a mountain, a jet plane will just happen to fly past the track in your eyeline, almost a salute to your cornering prowess. Birds scatter as you hammer past, elephants honk, water cascades and crowds cheer. If ever there was a game that makes you feel good about winning a race, this is it.

There are a very generous number of tracks available (though they only come in five different types of environment) and their twists and turns are varied. The handling is excellent, and after a short learning curve your car will respond exactly as it should, tearing around corners and whipping up straights. The only slight disappointment is that it can feel more like a floaty box than a hulking piece of finely tuned machinery, particularly when you realise that by far the most effective overtaking technique is to shunt opposing cars on corners and bounce off the titanium bushes that guard the sides of the road. This is offset somewhat by the AI, which ensures some exciting and lengthy struggles for places, particularly on the later tracks, but ultimately there are no significant penalties for careering around the track. In some ways this is the whole point of *Sega Rally*, but the game also has a tenuous grip on aspects of simulation, making you wish it had gone completely one way or the other.

There are some significant oversights that exacerbate this problem. The tracks come in groups of three in championship mode, and before each of these you have to select the variety of tyres you'll use – but then stick with that choice for the three races. As the tracks often oscillate wildly between mudholes and freeways it seems odd to not offer the player the option to change between races, and offroad tyres put you at such a significant speed disadvantage they'll likely only be chosen for specific single tracks in multiplayer or time-trial rather than during your time in the singleplayer championship.

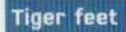
It seems almost ungrateful to criticise *Sega Rally*: while it can't measure up to the likes of *PGR4* in terms of graphical excesses, it has its own distinctive look and offers a huge number of tracks, cars and paint jobs for the solo player, and the limitless possibilities of multiplayer head-to-head and time-attack/leaderboard modes. But perhaps, in this fastest of genres, it's simply six months too late. It's good value and highly enjoyable, but in a race with *Forza Motorsport 2*, *PGR4*, *Dirt* and even the likes of *MotoGP '07*, there's the unmistakeable feel that *Sega Rally*'s been superseded before it leaves the grid.

[7]





The original *Sega Rally* car roster can be unlocked (albeit in upgraded form), while some tracks throw up familiar features







The surface effects aren't just for mud; racing through snow will mush the surface to a slurry, and, on tarmac, you can leave streaks of rubber that build up over successive laps to affect grip

Tiger feet



As your car races through the muddier tracks, your tyres leave imprints that impact upon the vehicles following and your own return to that area. The mud is a very noticeable visual effect – though, Sega being Sega, it's possibly the shiniest and sparkliest mud ever to grace a videogame – as it covers the surfaces of your car, and running through stretches of water will wash some of it off.

The major use is in allowing you to spot racing lines and follow them, adding a layer of tactical manoeuvring to go with all the shunting. It feels a little underwhelming in some of the environments, but in the likes of the Arctic tracks it becomes absolutely crucial to maintaining speed and control, and is key to the online component of the game.



LAIR

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 28
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: FACTOR 5 PREVIOUSLY IN: E169, E179

The water effects, like many of the game's visual touches, seem beautiful at a glance but then clumsy when placed under scrutiny: fly close to the surface and the illusion dissolves, revealing waves as weird, slow-moving lumps

Hadoken!



Several levels in the game will call for you to land among ground troops and begin spreading some chaos with your scaly steed. Watching the dragon march through lines of the enemy's army as if they're not there, fireballing and swiping left and right while chomping the odd soldier, can be a vivid spectacle. But the implementation simply doesn't stand up: the dragon lumbers around like an AT-AT walker rather than a powerful mass of muscle, the battle animations are horribly limited, and combat with anything larger than the human foes is pointless. That goes for close combat in general, where various QTEs seem little more than replacements for an idea of how to incorporate any advanced movement into your abilities.

How could you possibly mess up a game in which you ride a dragon? It would seem impossible: that little bit of childish glee everyone has at the mere thought of it guarantees an audience.

How you mess up a game in which you ride a dragon is quite simple. You make the control of that dragon answerable to motion-sensing technology that can't distinguish subtle or even very forced gestures in anything like the detail required, and then you sync different manoeuvres to similar movements of that technology. The Sixaxis responds perfectly well for tilting left or right and cruising through the skies, and these moments of sweeping flight are *Lair*'s best, but when asked to do anything beyond that – and *Lair* demands much more than simple tilting – it quickly proves itself incapable of the distinctions needed. Combined with this implementation of the Sixaxis are some truly awful design decisions: the 180° turn and the forward boost are frequently confused, meaning your dragon responds in the opposite manner to your intentions, and it's telling that almost every surface in the game triggers an 'autofly' mode when you get too close. The point is that *Lair* is a frustrating game to play, and you'll spend as much time overshooting targets and desperately righting your mount's directions as attacking enemies.



A preview-build issue was over-enthusiastic HDR lighting, causing the screen to wash out or dim to extremes. It's since been toned down, but some detail is still lost

But even without the flawed controls, this would not be a good game. Structures and level patterns are shamelessly recycled from Factor 5's own *Rogue Squadron* series, right down to the fact that a huge number of the missions involve escorting 'ships' in the form of flying 'whales', or stopping damage being done to a particularly stupid contingent of troops who will stand in plain sight to be divebombed by enemy dragons, impatiently waiting for you to save them. 'Take out the enemy's power supply' is a typical objective, divorced from its quasi-medieval world and insulting in its perfunctory nature. Rarely are you set objectives that seem like they have been created specifically for the game.

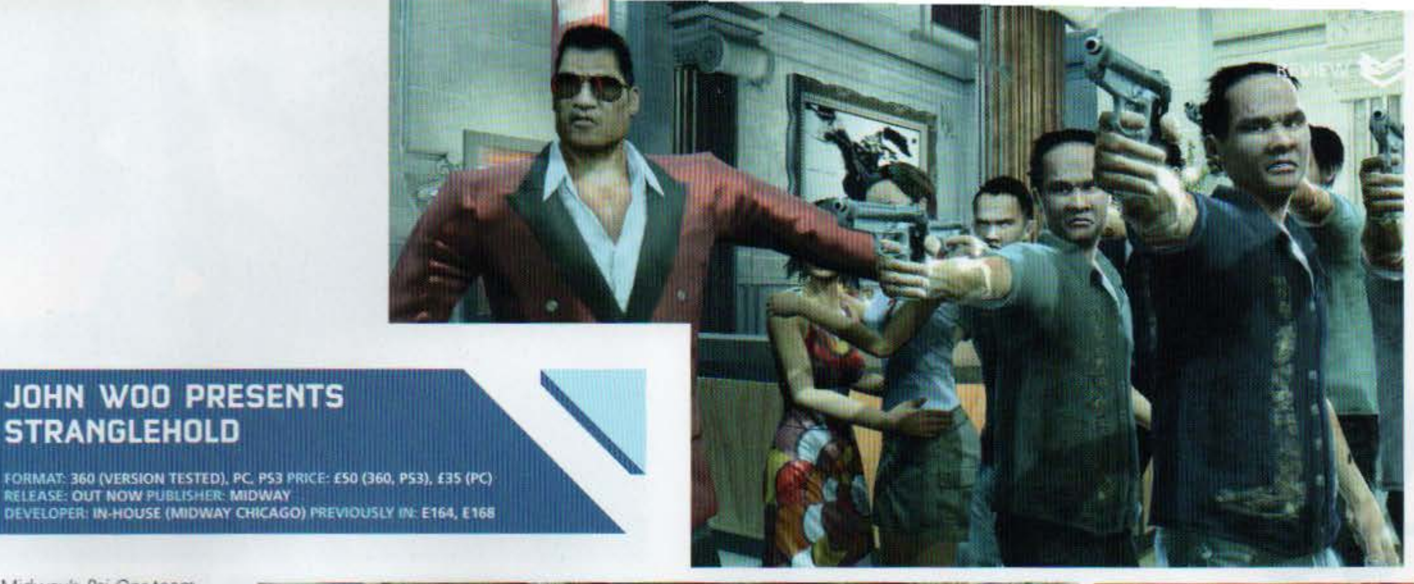
Lair's visuals alternate between exceptional and mediocre: its dragons are finely detailed and can be fearsome, but the other elements that make up *Lair*'s world, from the ground soldiers to the larger enemies, all lack a distinctive visual personality. Draw distance, meanwhile, is quite awful, with structures materialising as your dragon approaches; the framerate is poor for a supposedly cutting-edge PS3 title; and the explosions and lighting effects are abysmal and atmospheric respectively. Beyond this, the camera frequently loses sight of your position, and many of the levels are extremely difficult to navigate as a result.

Lair was once quite some proposition. But now, up close and with its gruesome lips peeled back, there's clearly been nothing but smoke obscuring an old, gnarled structure well past its best. So, this is how you mess up a game in which you ride a dragon. **[3]**





The attractive map comprises the mission select screen, and it heralds many minutes of turgid and (initially) unskippable dialogue. The voice acting might not be *Two Worlds* bad, but it is bad



JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 (360, PS3), £35 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MIDWAY
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (MIDWAY CHICAGO) PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168

Developed by Midway's *Psi-Ops* team in close collaboration with John Woo, *Stranglehold* is a game about the specific magic of action movies. Or, to put it another way, the escape artistry.

Time and again it crashes waves of enemies upon you, pushing you into corners from which even more enemies appear. It fences you in behind tables and chairs, offers refuge before blowing it away, and fills the screen with the trails of individually modelled bullets. Then it has you prevail, time and again, in magnificent fashion.

A pseudo-sequel to the movie Hard Boiled – and a new assignment for its troubled supercop Tequila – its debt to *Max Payne* is obvious. The movement system is fundamentally the same, combining free-look gunplay with bullet-time abilities and diving manoeuvres. But, by the same token, it's also collecting a debt from every gun battle waged since 1992, all of which have in part paid tribute to Woo's 'bullet ballet'. Choosing to improve rather than deny the methods of *Payne*, *Gungrave*, *Total Overdose* and *The Matrix: Path Of Neo* is just one of this game's wisdoms.



Tequila's special attacks, earned in sequence by scoring successive kills, start with Precision Aim, a slo-mo snipe. It's ideal for both boss assassinations and hit-response slapstick



Known misleadingly as the Tequila Bomb, the special attack gauge also unlocks a barrage mode (Tequila becomes invulnerable, visibly a little upset and trigger-happy) and later a devastating, dove-releasing spin attack



A *lot* of time, for example, has gone into getting the basics right. The chemistry of control, animation, AI and environmental damage systems is absolutely spot on, both in finding Hard Boiled's groove and providing coherent, rhythmic and unpredictable action. Aptly enough, Tequila flows from pillar to post (via swinging lantern, catering trolley and dinosaur skeleton) with liquid grace, gliding over complex scenery with just simple throws of the stick. His hands, meanwhile, are always free, ready to put bullets in heads from any and all positions.

By the time the story – a demented blood opera full of double-crosses, cigar smoke and giant sunglasses – has played out across Hong Kong and Chicago, you won't know for sure whether *Stranglehold* has cast you as Tequila or Woo, star or director. Its genius, a seamless mix of strategy and choreography, only flourishes at its unlockable Hard Boiled difficulty level, with aim assists off and special attacks at a premium.

Not since *Red Dead Revolver* has a gun game got it quite so right, despite itself. *Stranglehold*'s bosses, map-based objectives and single on-rails sequence feel redundant, its online deathmatch modes obligatory. Without them, you can't help feel it may have eked some extra polish from Unreal Engine 3 and refined its low-resolution textures, or better still its tiresome second level. Tequila can't escape tradition, it seems, even if he does come out blazing. **[7]**

Massive effect





If a tear of joy isn't shed when you discover Tequila's 'prone' ability (above), you've never seen Die Hard. Holding the trigger after a dive keeps you stretched out on the floor, ideally placed for ground-to-crotch attacks. Guitar drops (left), meanwhile, challenge you to second-guess the level design by placing two health-recharging guitar cases about the level before the fight begins

The influence of *Stranglehold*'s Massive D physics system becomes more apparent as the game goes on. What starts as a crude series of environmental opportunities – signage falls on heads, awnings split, rockfalls take out gangs, and pillars collapse to create bridges – later dictates your most basic strategy. When enemies are spawning from every angle, some with sniper rifles and others with shotguns, finding immediate cover is essential, yet at the same time futile. Little in this game's Chicago and Kowloon levels stays intact for very long, Tequila's presence being the kiss of death for anything made of brick, plaster or glass. The game has an exceptional control system and expects you to use it, leaving little time for loitering with intent to take potshots.



SKATE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW (360), OCTOBER 12 (PS3) PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA BLACK BOX PREVIOUSLY IN: E175

Less can be more. The axiom's simple but easily forgotten: in a market saturated with titles, promising to do everything bigger, faster and louder than the competition – or your last iteration – seems the safest way to stand out. The *Tony Hawk* series has been perfecting this approach for years, so how can upstart *Skate* possibly take it on?

Simple: it doesn't. *Skate*'s best trick is to make every landing seem like a tiny victory: with physics that at least pay lip service to the realities of gravity and broken bones, simply making it down a flight of steps can be cause for celebration. And with the Birdman continuing to treat near-impossible tricks like the legendary Natas Spin as merely routine, *Skate*'s strength is that it gives even kickflips and shove-its the respect they deserve.

Oddly, the control system is most comparable to EA stablemate *Fight Night*'s. Holding the right analogue stick in one direction prepares your skater for a jump; flicking it in another launches you into the air. Later tricks require quarter- and half-circles, while combining them with a spin means using the left stick at the same time. Rather than requiring a simple stab of the button, grinds mean approaching on the right line and jumping at the right moment. Just as with *Fight Night*'s feints and power hooks, though, this is only half the story – trick variations require a defter touch. Manuals involve holding the stick in a balancing sweet spot, while getting more aerial 'pop' out of tricks means being more aggressive with your flicks. This sort of fine control seems impossible at first but soon becomes second nature, allowing tricks to be chained together with impressive fluidity. Much harder is finding the right place to do them – with environments kept realistically sparse and momentum always a concern, working out a good line is half the battle. Again, though, this is like real skating. With a D-pad shortcut letting you 'session' any spot from your own chosen point, the repetition of half a dozen tricks in the pursuit of perfection becomes almost Zen-like.

Show me the way

Where *Hawk* likes to play talent scout – *Project 8*'s roster included 11-year-old wunderkind Nyjah Huston – *Skate* is content with a selection of less technically accomplished, more charismatic skaters drawn from the ranks of the Plan B skate label. Ironically for a game that keeps itself so defiantly grounded, though, its biggest star is best known for stunts that wouldn't look out of place in *THPS*: frontman Danny Way's resumé includes jumping the Great Wall Of China and 'bomb dropping' on to a vert ramp from a helicopter.





Skate's replay system is one of its best features, always keeping the last 60 seconds or so in the bank just in case something unexpected happens. Highlights can be spliced together, then uploaded to the internet



Grinds and manuals are all present and correct, but the game misses out stalls and handplants. The controls use one stick for the board, another for the body, and buttons and triggers to fling your skater's limbs around in the approved manner



The game starts in suburbia, introducing you to the intricacies of its trick system as you're forced to glean points from kerbs and benches. As your skills improve, the amount of half- and quarter-pipes in the environments gradually grows, until you hit the lunacy of the X-Games







Compare and contrast YouTube replays of *Skate* tricks to *Hawk*'s bloated, 50-million point combos – the latter might contain 60 tricks done too fast to see, while the former wouldn't look out of place in a genuine skate video.

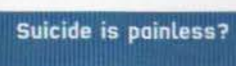
Hawk may have mellowed in its last couple of instalments, toning down the Jackass-inspired excesses of the *THUG* years and slowing things down a notch. *Skate* may have the oversights you'd expect of the first in an inevitable franchise – the pacing's aggravating at times, and the lack of female skaters could irk some. But there's only one skate game that demands to be played this year, and while the chairman of the board's desperately trying to impress, *Skate*'s cool as it struts on to the scene has to be admired. Sometimes, it's better to settle for less. **[8]**



In battles, you only gain direct control over your own character. Your teammates can be given general directions (such as to major on offensive moves or healing) but their specific actions are handled by the competent AI

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA 3

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (US), £30 (UK)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Suicide is painless?



Personas are ethereal creatures that are summoned from your unconscious mind to lend their abilities in battle. For this reason, the stronger your relationships with other students or groups the stronger your 'inner self' is and the more powerful your Personas will become.

One of the most enduring images from the game comes from the way in which characters summon a Persona: by putting a gun (known in the game as an 'evoker') to their temple before pulling the trigger. To players not closely familiar with anime culture it's a shocking image that's used repeatedly, and since the game's release has attracted keen debate in the US as to its suitability.

Anyone who's ever complained that there aren't enough hours in the day will be pleased with *Persona 3*'s premise. Soon after enrolling your character at the local Japanese high school you're accepted into a covert society and let in on an enormous secret: there are, in fact, 25 hours to a day.

The extra 'dark hour', as it's known, occurs every night at midnight. The vast majority of the populace is unaware of its existence as, for its duration, they are rendered unconscious and sealed in coffins, oblivious to the shadow creatures that emerge outside and roam the world looking for prey. A few humans remain unaffected by the phenomenon and, as one of them, it's in the sparse company of these cognoscenti that your character finds himself after dark.

The group, called the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad, is responsible for holding back the shadow creatures' advance while trying to uncover the secrets of their origin, a huge multi-storey ephemeral tower named Tartarus, which emerges each night in the school grounds. Tartarus takes the form of an upwardly built dungeon whose *Rogue*-like floorplans change every visit. Your overarching mission is to scale the tower bit by bit (don't panic: a warp opens up every five floors) while levelling up and discovering new Personas: creatures that can be summoned to aid you in battle.

While this a little traditional, the dark hour is just one element to an unorthodox game whose scenario manages to twist it out of the firm grip of its JRPG roots. In the main this is achieved by the dark hour's counterpoint: daytime, during which you participate in the lessons, clubs and societies of a Japanese school.

Here, in a similar way to *Canis Canem Edit*, you're tasked with daily studying, exam taking and after-school clubs and sports, all minigame-style pursuits that are used as a means to build and enhance your character's abilities. Three core stats (academics, charm and courage) must be raised by taking part in a wide range of different activities from enrolling in the school's kendo team to visiting the karaoke bar in the local mall of an evening. Raising these statistics while building and fostering relationships in school is crucial to creating stronger Personas to make your character more powerful on the nightly battlefield.

By linking the game directly to 2009's school term calendar and breaking every day into seven distinct stages (from early morning through lunchtime to late at night), you quickly settle into the comfortable rhythm of an education system, which provides an excellent framework for the disparate mechanics to slot into.

The game's aesthetics are unusual for the genre. Low-poly environments, simple character models and drab lighting are the uninspiring visual building blocks. However, thanks to some ingenious use of beautiful anime artwork the game fizzes with life as character portraits zoom into shot to personify the dialogue while slick and design-conscious menus add some contemporary style.

As with any game that's based on repetitive tasks set in unchanging environments, its rhythm in time becomes a little monotonous. However, the frequent boss battles (introduced every few levels of Tartarus) and surprisingly compelling relationships you foster daily inspire perseverance. Games with distinctive souls are rare things but *Persona 3* succeeds in displaying a mesmerising personality that touches the many well-crafted aspects of its curious and singular approach. **[7]**

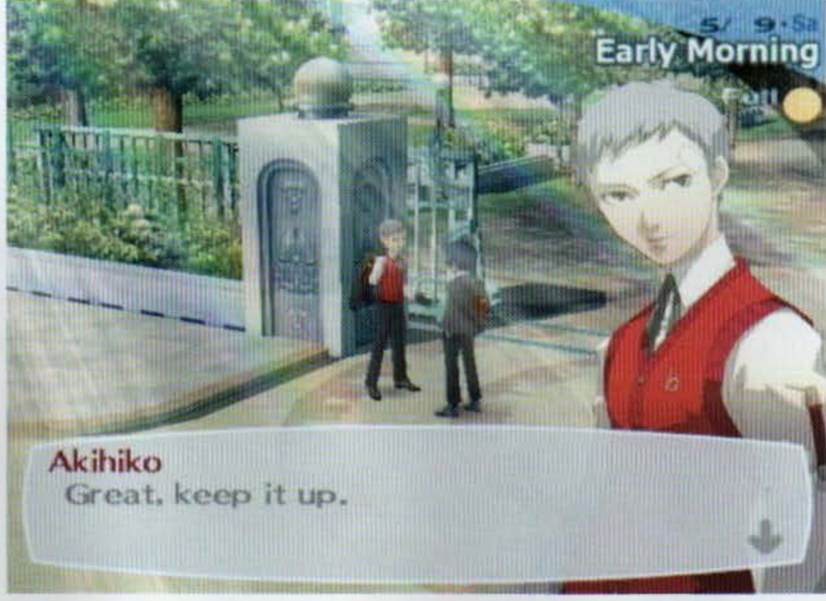


Fans furious at the lack of a Japanese audio option have already released on the internet a patched version known as an 'undub', with English subtitles but original voices





You aren't forced to visit Tartarus every night. If you'd rather you can meet up with a friend at the local mall, visit a club in town or spend the evening at your desk studying, all of which level up aspects of your personality





Persona cards can be fused together with one another to create entirely new monsters, and much of the deeper level of play is concerned with maximising resources to uncover the most powerful Personas in the game



SINGSTAR

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: TBC RELEASE: OCTOBER
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: LONDON STUDIO

The usual assortment of inspired choices and duds finds its way on to the default playlist, though surely listening to Robbie Williams and Nicole Kidman gleefully murder a classic will tax even the most undiscerning of listeners

It has been three years since the release of the original *SingStar*, and the PlayStation 3 debut now stands as the 11th title in the series. That number is indicative of two things: the success of, and demand for, the games; and the central concept being so well realised that the only consideration for a new instalment is a new tracklisting. But with the increased expectations of a PS3 audience and, currently, fewer peopler to aim for, can *SingStar*'s formula still hit the right notes?

The presentation of the game is a major improvement over the last generation's clinical tones, and the interface is ideal: clean, bright, uncluttered, and easily navigable. This extends to ever-present shortcut keys, and there are some welcome customisation options: the wallpapers can be changed between the likes of a deep purple noir and a beautiful orange sunset (with some appropriate plink-plonk elevator music for lulls in the party). Most importantly, the online features are easily accessible and significantly more user-friendly than those of most other PSN titles.

Those online features are the crux of PS3 *SingStar*, in a way, because it may be that this is the only boxed retail version of the game for the current generation for some time. The 36 tracks that come as standard are a diverse selection of recent chart hits and oldies. Everyone will think there are a few duffers, of course, but in general it does a good job of showcasing a range of styles and is a fine starting point for the inevitable



Moments of high camp are staple karaoke evening components, and they really stack up in this iteration of SingStar thanks to the inclusion of I Don't Feel Like Dancing by the Scissor Sisters, complete with super-gaudy video

library that will be accumulated over the PlayStation Network. The songs can be bought individually, or in themed packs of five to ten tracks, and the entire PS2 library will be available to buy at launch before an outpouring of content at a rate of between 50 to 100 songs a month.

The singing itself takes place with the music videos in the background (some in HD), while the proven note bars direct the pitch and length of your warbling. It's a masterpiece of functional design, fundamentally unchanged from the last generation, bar the improved graphics and



a better placing of the score counter, and all the better for it. The only bum note is that it's still possible to get remarkably good marks by humming along to the track rather than singing – which is not an issue in terms of cheating (after all, who would bother playing a karaoke game to cheat at it?) but is certainly a little deflating and ruins any sense that the score reflects your singing. As *Rock Band* approaches with phoneme recognition – which admittedly has still to be tested fully – it perhaps needs to be pointed out that this is the only aspect of *SingStar* that's broken, and there's no excuse not to fix it.

SingStar for PS3 is a refinement that is a triumph of presentation as well as a winning game. There are some niggling decisions, but they never spoil the experience, and the constant flow of new content makes it a game that will last as long as Sony's console does – that is, if you're prepared to make the financial investment required to maintain a song library. **[8]**

The online SingStore allows you to buy songs individually at a reasonable price (though no official figures have been quoted, it looks like they'll clock in at a pound per track) as well as 'theme packs', which come at a discount



The game is full of scope for changing its appearance and output, and the backgrounds have obviously been created for those quiet moments when karaoke seems unthinkable – they even each have their own custom muzak

Record and play



One of PS3 *SingStar*'s new features incorporates the PlayStation Eye to record a 30-second video of your performance. Although it's initially disappointing that you can't record an entire song for others to marvel at, the quality of the Eye's video and audio playback make it an ideal party tool for showing off your concentration on those few key notes, and any moments of inspired dancing. Contrary to expectations of a user video market online, the real strength of the feature may be in replaying things that happened a minute ago to the group that watched it, and that 30-second limit turns out to work well.



TWO WORLDS

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £50 (360), £35 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SOUTH PEAK
DEVELOPER: REALITY PUMPED



And they said it couldn't be done. *Two Worlds* is a less humorous version of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Its imitation is not only the sincerest but also the most polite form of flattery, as it slavishly devotes itself to only minor tweaks and at no stage threatens the supremacy of Bethseda's game.

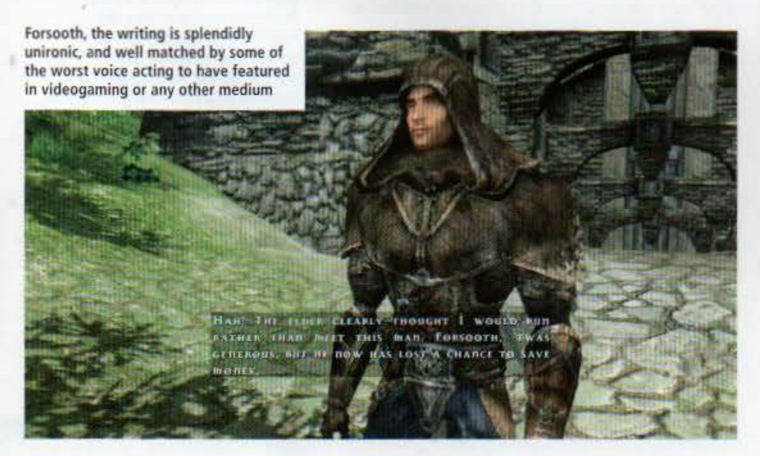
The world is more populous, but that population is made up of identical creatures who aren't fun to fight, and who chase you but can't stop you running – thus a procession of hopelessly polygonal wolves, boars and goblins follow you everywhere. The levelling system is much better, allowing for considerable variation, and the ability to combine tools to create more effective equipment is a fine addition. But quests have little imagination beyond the templates laid out by other games, and moving through the world is constantly interrupted by the screen freezing for loading – a great irritation, occurring as it does every 30 seconds.

In fact the best thing about *Two Worlds* is that the voice actors are so awful that they add some light relief, and the script is home to some real deadpan classics: "I believe I would very much like to wipe the smirk off Reisk's face – with his own blood!"

Two Worlds has a lot of content for anyone willing to slog through it, but its buggy failure to take *Oblivion*'s crown, its troubled development and unfinished feel are testament to ideas beyond its makers' capabilities. **[4]**



The chase is on. Unfortunately, it's a chase that won't ever end and is only interrupted by the game's stuttering framerate and frequent loading



Forsooth, the writing is splendidly unironic, and well matched by some of the worst voice acting to have featured in videogaming or any other medium



GRIMGRIMOIRE

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VANILLAWARE DEVELOPER: NIPPON ICHI
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177

Realtime strategy games focus on creating and defending territory. Perhaps for this reason developers with the genre are so adept at putting off plucky newcomers: nowadays, precious few break into this aged realm.

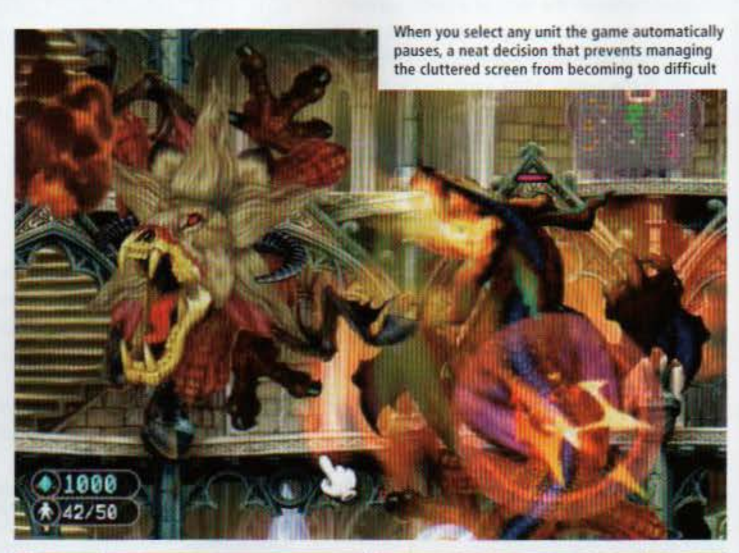
Nippon Ichi, however, having worked every conceivable bastardisation of the strategy RPG over the last few years, isn't one for respecting tradition and this, the Japanese developer's first RTS, is just as irreverent as its back catalogue would suggest. Eschewing 3D graphics and environments, this is an RTS squashed flat, the player's task to expand and defend dominion on the flat axes of multi-floored 2D castle levels – a fresh take on another of gaming's eldest expressions.

Less innovative, at least initially, is the game's story. Focusing on a young wizard protagonist enrolling at a magical school to study under the tutelage of a white-bearded professor, Gammel Dore, it's a keenly familiar backdrop. But a core narrative conceit has players replaying the five same days repeatedly in Groundhog Day style, an imaginative twist that soon reveals an individual soul.

This extends into the levels that have you collecting resources, creating units and directing attacks and defences. Players are able to place 12 different runes on the battlefield that can each build different types of units. A slew of magical creatures, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, must be deployed and directed to destroy your enemy's runes and so win the map.

New unit types are added level by level and you'll soon be managing a sprawling army across the map, which, in later stages, can feel like playing a hundred different games of scissors-paper-stone simultaneously. A few interface niggles and the eventual feeling of repetition don't hold back a creative reimagining of a game type that, thanks to the execution, is as important as it is enjoyable. **[7]**

When you select any unit the game automatically pauses, a neat decision that prevents managing the cluttered screen from becoming too difficult







Like Vanillaware's other current PS2 title, *Odin Sphere*, spites and backgrounds are richly detailed, and dodge many of the usual Japanese design clichés despite the big-eyed girls and revealing outfits





JAM SESSIONS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 28
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: PLATO PREVIOUSLY IN: E178

Jam Sessions is another title in the long line of DS software that is more of a tool than a game. Essentially a guitar sim, the touchscreen shows a string that can be twanged up or down and stroked with varying degrees of subtlety, while the D-pad selects the chord you're playing. There are training modes in which you can train your ear to recognise notes, and a few song examples to play along with, but there are a limited number of these, and no option for a backing track or any audio guide barring a basic metronome.

And that's your lot. This is no *Guitar Hero*, or even a rhythm-action game, but something more akin to a portable notepad for musicians. Rather than allow the musical neophyte to feel as if they've accomplished something, *Jam Sessions* will make it very clear to the uninitiated that they cannot play music, and should sit in the corner while their DS gently weeps. As long as that's accepted, it performs admirably for the most part



The interface is fairly intuitive, and it responds well to player input, varying timbre with the speed and direction of each stylus stroke

(although the use of D-pad diagonals is frustrating) and can be a hugely satisfying diversion – and the option to save your compositions make it a worthwhile purchase for real guitarists.

Jam Sessions depends very much on whether you want instant feedback on compositions that occur on the bus to work or want to play a music game that creates an illusion of competence. If the former, it will do the job well and the occasional fault can be forgiven; if the latter, look elsewhere. **[6]**





The game comes with some classic tracks from the likes of Nirvana and Dylan. Which is fortunate since it lacks backing tracks, meaning that playing along is tricky for amateurs who don't already know the tunes



FINAL FANTASY TACTICS: THE WAR OF THE LIONS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OCTOBER 5
PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Characters levelled in singleplayer are used in the ad-hoc-only multiplayer modes, and teams are assigned colours to avoid confusion. The winner will receive a random item that can be used in the main campaign

In the ten years since *Final Fantasy Tactics'* original PlayStation release the strategy RPG, more than most other genres, has undergone vast evolution. Nippon Ichi's interpretations of the often pedestrian turn- and grid-based gameplay with the hyperactive *Disgaea* and its wild-eyed cousins has widened and deepened the borders of SRPG definition. But it's testament to *Final Fantasy Tactics'* incredibly robust mechanics and artistically coherent execution that this 'enhanced remake' shows the game to be one of the very best examples of the genre, even if its technicalities are altogether more vanilla than those of the showy contemporary competition.

Director Yasumi Matsuno's first project for Square-Enix, the game closely follows the tread of his earlier work, the *Ogre Battle* series. The core mechanic sees players manoeuvring a handful of units around small grid-based environments in an attempt to decimate the opposition. Every action from the striking of a sword to the drinking of a potion earns a unit experience and job points. The onus is then on the player to develop a balanced team of knights, archers, healers and mages, a system only slightly more complex than the titles that preceded it.

But with Square's deep pockets and resources these basics now bristle with visual and aural panache and are framed by one of videogaming's most lavish and intricate stories. Following young mercenary Ramza Beovule, bastard son of a knight of nobility and protector of an heir to the Ivalice throne, the game's elaborate narrative is austere and weighty, now brought to life by a fresh and considered new translation for the PSP.

Indeed, this conversion is far more than a straightforward emulation, having been recast in splendid widescreen, bolstered by well-executed head-to-head multiplayer modes, invested with new characters and finally garnished with exquisite new hand-drawn cutscenes from the game's original artist, the supremely talented Akihiko Yoshida.

A small amount of slowdown makes certain battles drag and the occasional issue with being able to properly see units obscured by houses or hills is exacerbated on the PSP's smaller screen. Nevertheless, this still stands as one of videogaming's greatest achievements, one finally properly served by an excellent English translation to reveal a game that feels far fresher than its age, setting and rivals might otherwise suggest. **[9]**



Recognisable *Final Fantasy* furnishings appear throughout the game, from common chocobos to Black Mages, as well as the occasional cameo



WORLD IN CONFLICT

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £35 (PC), £40 (360)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (PC), TBC (360) PUBLISHER: SIERRA
DEVELOPER: MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E175

Swedish developer Massive Entertainment's third push into the realtime strategy market looks like it might finally bring the reward of commercial success. After the uncertain science-fiction forays of the *Ground Control* games in 2000 and 2004, Massive is trying something different: World War III. Set in 1988, *World In Conflict* tells the story of the Cold War having gone thermonuclear, with an invasion of North American by Russian troops, and a Warsaw Pact war in western Europe.

World In Conflict is just as visually impressive as the *Ground Control* games were in their day. It also boasts some astoundingly authentic battlefield events, including fully destructible scenery and realtime nuclear explosions. Nevertheless, *World In Conflict* delivers an uneven experience. The singleplayer has some compelling highlights – such as a bridge defence using almost unlimited artillery support and an assault on the Statue of Liberty – but the conveyor-belt appearance of enemies and their complete lack of





Infantry, with their associated light transport vehicles, are vulnerable but can be enormously versatile. As in *Ground Control 2*, getting them to take cover inside buildings will massively increase their survivability in a firefight

tactical proficiency renders the solo game rather unfulfilling.

Where Massive's achievement lies is in creating a class-based eight-a-side multiplayer game, in which two teams struggle for control of meticulously detailed maps. Players have to work together to pin down areas using either helicopters, tanks, infantry or support vehicles such as rocket artillery and APCs. Being based purely around the use of individual units, rather than base-building, the games are all action. The only real resource to manage is the amount of off-map artillery and air support you can call in to support your team, meaning you can concentrate on using the terrain and the abilities of your troops to overcome enemy assaults. This is the closest strategy games have ever come to the drop-in-and-play freedoms of FPS deathmatch games.

Ultimately, this is one of the finest tactical challenges of 2007 – but only if you play online. **[8]**



Rocket artillery is about the most satisfying visual effect in the game. It also delivers a huge amount of damage in the targeted area, and you certainly don't want to have friendlies in there when it hits

ETERNAL SONATA

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: TRI-CRESCENDO



Eternal Sonata begins in a bedroom in 1849 where Chopin is dying from tuberculosis: in his final hours he imagines a fantasy world which provides the setting for the game, peopled with parallels to his 'real' life, and begins travelling through it.

The game begins with a long cutscene outlining this, and continues through a series of long cutscenes for at least the first three hours. Combined with this, the tutorials take a great deal of time and omit to mention some of the more crucial battlefield dynamics until later in the game. It's easy to be put off by this unwelcoming opening, but once the game proper begins it swiftly improves and shows itself to be one of the best RPGs available on Xbox 360 by some distance.

It's a beautiful game, with a mixture of flat-shading and rendered backgrounds that work together elegantly. There is a shimmer around the characters as they move through this alternatively opalescent and bright landscape, and the overall effect can be quite magical. The script is occasionally a little too flowery for its



As Chopin travels through the world he becomes less and less sure he has imagined this alternate universe, and begins to question his perceptions, which becomes a comment on the nature of RPGs

own good (on one occasion caught red-handed reminiscing about a 'babbling brook') but in context it can be forgiven. Less forgivable is the overbearing voice acting, and the dungeons which sometimes depend on retracing your steps around an environment while enemies respawn.

But despite these annoyances, *Eternal Sonata* has more than its share of trump cards. The battle system is a finely judged mixture of action and turn-based strategy, the story becomes more interesting as it progresses, and your party members have charm (and also level up at a rate that means little in the way of grinding is required). There's nothing revolutionary in *Eternal Sonata*, but it's a well-executed RPG with style in abundance. **[7]**





Chopin's sister died from TB at 14, something that haunted him during his own battle with the disease. In his fantasy world, Polka (the back of whose head is on the left) is a 14-year-old girl marked for death



PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

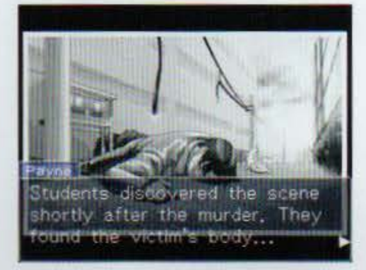
FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥3,500 (£15) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JP), OCT 23 (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

As the final *Phoenix Wright* game, Capcom has set a lot on *Trials And Tribulations'* shoulders to tie up a lot of loose strands from the series' overarching story about Wright, his dead mentor, Mia, and the mysterious Fey family. As a result, its five cases are inundated with references to the previous games, returning characters and a good deal of expounding soliloquies to brief new players and returning ones on what's going on. The overarching plot is pretty much as complex and twisting as each individual case, which seem particularly Byzantine in this game, so players will have to have their wits about them to keep up with it all.

But though newcomers might struggle to care about the plot, it's not a necessity to have played previous games: the opening case, which – shock – features Mia Fey instead of Phoenix Wright in a flashback to her second ever case, is as good a tutorial to the idiosyncrasies of *Phoenix Wright* game design and its take on courtroom procedure as in the previous titles. This is, after all, functionally identical to its immediate predecessor, *Justice for All*. Combined with the extensive reuse of character art it confirms that this is nothing more than a set of new stories rather than a new game in itself.

And, though once fresh, the formula continues to creak. When a critical piece of evidence that will prove a witness' statement false eludes because the game logic is so obtuse (and there's a case of this discouragingly early in the game), the lively storytelling and flamboyant characterisation are sometimes barely enough to compensate. The essential problem is that Wright always knows more about what's going on than you do. Often you'll present a piece of evidence on a hunch and find him explaining it far beyond your own understanding. The result is distance from the story, and a reminder of the paucity of interactivity on offer.

Granted, when the narrative is allowed to amiably bound along, *Trials And Tribulations* is as enjoyable and endearing as any of its predecessors. But it's rather relieving that, for now, Wright is hanging up the wig. **[6]**



The Japanese edition contains both Japanese and English text. Though the translation is as good a standard as in previous *Wrights*, it contains a few typos, a fact that Capcom has acknowledged and aims to fix for the game's western release



***Trials And Tribulations* has a playful attitude to its five cases, with one apparently not featuring a murder at all and two conducted by Mia Fey**

SONIC RUSH ADVENTURE

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)



During inter-island jaunts, simply holding your stylus on the screen propels your craft, while strokes allow you to pull off tricks over ramps

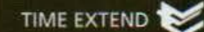
Increase the speed of the main character and the player's reaction time decreases exponentially. It's a simple correlation that *Sonic The Hedgehog* creator Yuji Naka was well aware of when designing his most celebrated work. He realised that the intricate platforming of Mario et al was out of the question when operating at Sonic's pace. At this level of existence, the gameplay must be distilled into a sequence of yes/no choices, or else descend into arbitrary chaos. Naka's solution was to assign each button with the same function; Sonic was a critical success. Fifteen years down the evolution line, *Sonic Rush Adventure* has a tutorial mode.

Ignoring the advice laid down by *Sonic Rush*'s external developer Dimps, Sega has elected to create something that plays as the 2D equivalent of the 3D Sonic titles. Hence, to maintain a sense of speed, *Sonic Rush Adventure* elects to take control from the hands of the player via an inordinate amount of inconsequential set-pieces, the other, less elegant solution to decreased reaction times. Worse, the one major flaw of the first title – that of an endless succession of death pits – has not been addressed, which is an unforgivable flaw in a game so dependant on vertical level design.

More forgivable is the increase in exposition – a charming shipwreck story that sees Team Sonic team up with an antipodean racoon named Marine. However, the net result is a compilation of interminable, touch-driven sailing minigames – proof that the DS's most innovative feature can also be tiresome. Often dwarfing the key action, these minigames are a manifestation of a series that's been unrecognisably perverted from its original purpose, flashes of brilliance or speed only serving as a reminder of what has been lost – as upsetting as a tragic pop star's final performance. **[5]**


If you manage to suppress your rising sense of ennui long enough to suffer through the flabby minigames, you're allowed a glimpse or two of classic *Sonic* action. Then you fall in a pit and die


XBOX
METAL ARMS



TIME EXTEND

METAL ARMS: GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **SWINGIN' APE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2003**

Or how Swingin' Ape brought robotic chaos, guns that fired saw blades, and comedy German accents to the thirdperson shooter

Computers don't do chaos particularly well. They don't like randomness, or clutter, or anything that can't be reduced down into a logical pattern. It's part of the reason why games that attempt hyper-realism can end up collapsing under the weight of their own pretension – because chaos is a fundamental part of real life.

But *Metal Arms* does chaos. It does randomness, lunacy, sadism, idiocy and comedy too, but what it does the best is chaos. The end result – something that could so easily have been a formulaic thirdperson run'n'gunner – was one of the liveliest and most personable releases of its generation, presenting a cohesive and believable gameworld, then allowing the player to run amok within it.

It's difficult to see anything special about *Metal Arms* when you start playing for the first time, though. A short cutscene introduces Iron Star, a world of rust and bolts, populated by metal men, a race of worker droids forced into slavery by a ruling militaristic sect, a struggling resistance movement and the player character, Glitch, a mining droid whose construction is slightly different from the rest. And then you're thrown into the first level.

Which takes place in a mineshaft. It's not the most auspicious opening to a game. In fact, the first level as a whole is a remarkably poor representation of what's to come. A training section that kits you out with a pathetically underpowered weapon and asks you to do little more than observe and repeat, it might as well be on rails. Brown corridors, prescribed combat sections, jump here, do this, do that. There's no life in this kind of gaming, and there's certainly no chaos.

Metal Arms didn't perform fantastically at retail. It didn't do too badly, either, but it shared a fate with other games released around the same time – *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* and *Beyond Good & Evil*, to name two – in that it didn't sell as its publisher hoped, getting lost in the seasonal ocean of annual updates and licensed properties. And in some respects it only has itself to blame for that. First impressions last, and the first thing you ask a player to do in any game should be something memorable.

That first level passes, though, and as soon as the second begins you are given a taste of what's to come: madness, orchestrated bedlam and the exercising of any sadistic tendencies that you may secretly be harbouring. And it quickly demonstrates that as main characters go, Glitch is a mere cipher, a non-entity, because the true star of the show is his weapon-set.

The game quickly demonstrates that, as main characters go, Glitch is a non-entity – because the true star of the show is his weapon-set

Take, for example, the Ripper – the first proper weapon you're given and your introduction to the game's true raison d'être. Firing rusty sawtooth discs that bite into anything standing in their path, it's dirty, violent and vicious. It's also, as are all of the weapons from this point in, a joy to use against the enemy – the Mil Army, footsoldiers of General Corrosive, *Metal Arms*' ultimate bad guy.

Robots generally mean one thing in videogames: stomping, heavy metal brutality. But *Metal Arms* interprets it differently. The Mils are at the heart of the chaos. Their lowest ranks, the Grunts, are gangly collections of cartoonish scrap metal, all lolloping arms and lop-sided movement. They're charmingly inept and clunky – all boxy bodies and loosely screwed limbs – and they present the most rewarding targets of perhaps any shooter to date. In fact, the blurb on the back of the packaging sums it up perfectly: 'Dismantling the enemy, one bolt at a time'.

You equip the Ripper and fire it at the arm of an approaching Mil. It saws through enough of the limb to leave


He may be huge and threatening, but the battles with General Corrosive disappoint. You get to take control of his body, but it's not half as much fun as you expect




Whether stomping through Mil City's outskirts in the body of a Titan, navigating the roofs of Droid Town via jump pads and ziplines, or preparing a ragtag team of fellow miners for a mass assault, control throughout is never less than joyously boisterous





THE SOUND OF VIOLENCE

The noise of warfare is only one part of the soundtrack, albeit an important and expertly produced one. Arguably the most significant part of the audio is the voice work, which is perfectly judged to give the game real character and personality. Whether it be the comedy German accent of a major enemy Grunt – an apparently random inclusion that only increases the bizarrely appealing humour – the South Park-inspired bleeped swearing of the resistance mechanic, or the generic bank of put-downs and shocked exclamations for the regular enemies, the vocals always manage to add to the game's sense of humour. Even the frequent farting – hardly comedy's high-water mark – manages to be amusing.





This is a game where replayability comes less from searching for hidden bonuses than it does the delight of making things go boom in new and interesting ways





It's a tightly designed game, and one that's not afraid to use colours other than brown and grey to spice up what could have been dull robot character models

it hanging, still capable of firing its weapon, but unable to aim. That's the first step in the recipe for chaos. The AI response is the next: panic and wildfire. Anybody standing within range – friend or foe – is at the mercy of chance. Maybe the blind shooting will hit another Grunt and take out its grenade arm. Maybe it will attempt to lob a grenade at you, only for it to end up bouncing behind it, into a group of its own comrades.

What is chaos? Within *Metal Arms*, at least, it's ultimately the result of an infinite number of patterned possibilities colliding. Set one thing in motion and you know what's going to happen. Have something else happen concurrently and have it interact with that first, and it gets harder to predict the outcome. As that cycle builds, it becomes impossible to envisage the results of your actions, rendering *Metal Arms*' encounters completely believable representations of that chaotic volatility.

In a number of significant respects, this is a game based on a roughly similar formula to that which has become *Halo*'s calling card: the same few seconds of gameplay repeated, with variety provided by a blend of enemy types and shifting geography. The unpredictability, however, is created by nothing more groundbreaking than the body-area-specific damage seen in games like *Virtua Cop* and the N64's *GoldenEye*. *Metal Arms* expands the idea from those cosmetic origins into a feature with consequence, an amplification that makes battles endlessly replayable in a way that even Bungie's game doesn't quite achieve.

Yet *Metal Arms* knows better than to leave you feeling like a leaf caught in its hurricane. At all points you're in charge, not just in the eye of the storm, but the force controlling it. With its enemy placement predetermined and persistent, any eruption of violence always has you,

This is a game based on a roughly similar formula to that which has become Halo's calling card: the same few seconds of gameplay repeated

the player, as its point of origin, and that allows the game to get away with another inevitable consequence of its inclination towards apparent randomness: difficulty spikes.

If a single action can have an infinite number of possible outcomes, you're not going to be able to prepare for them all. Combine this with a difficulty setting that perhaps leans towards the harsher end of the spectrum and the result is a lot of checkpoint restarts. While frequently fatal to other games, however, here they don't become a chore. Reload, experiment with another approach, and it still feels fresh and new.

Adding to that sense of experimentation is the gleeful wrongness that exists at its heart. As a child, *Metal Arms* pulled the legs off every spider it found, and it whispers in your ear, persuading you to do the same. Shhh, nobody'll find out. See how they squirm. Aim for the head, watch it panic. Take out its legs and leave it unable to defend its back. Or engage in the most extreme form of the game's dark mischief – possess the body of a Mil enemy and walk it into the middle of a collection of its unsuspecting comrades before firing a rocket, point blank, into the face of one of them.

At every moment you're encouraged to put your imagination to work. Only the bravest games open themselves up to players' propensities for trying to break their own internal logics. And, whether through planning or sheer luck, the setting here even excuses those moments when things do fall over. Iron Star's inept creator made the planet's population out of metal and software, but didn't factor in the frequency with which mechanical things break down, and the game turns this concept to its advantage, introducing weapons that



Despite the noise and fury, the few vehicle-only levels can frustrate until they're fully understood, and look scruffy in comparison to the regular action



Different enemy types are instantly recognisable and present unique threats (unique opportunities, too, once you've subverted their programming)

can fiddle with Mil brains to the extent that they fight for you, turning on their own side.

Standing back and viewing the game's structure from a distance makes its success in creating an atmosphere of large-scale, riotous annihilation even more impressive. Each of its levels – bar the few vehicle-only ones – is far smaller in actuality than it feels to play. Its world is split into a large number of compact and distinct stages, their physical size given away only by the target speed-run times provided at the end of certain examples, but the inclusion of a platforming double-jump gives the player the ability to explore the vertical space within each, opening them up significantly and allowing for the sort of exploration that many games refuse. Whether you're attempting to gain a vantage point above enemies or indulging your instinct to try breaking out of the level's confines, this extra element of generous freedom, when combined with those joyful weapons, effectively turns each area into a mini sandbox.

Tellingly, it's the moments when the freedom is abandoned, when *Metal Arms* forces the player to engage with it in a particular manner, that it's at its least enjoyable. Boss battles require the use of predefined strategies to overcome, and there's a fixed gun emplacement level around the halfway mark that's an absolute dog to play, a brick wall of frustration. The only positive thing you can take away from this section is the thought that at least you're going straight back into the good stuff.

And what explosively good stuff that is. As the environments become more expansive and Glitch's weapons reach their powered-up zenith, all that destruction, all that chaos, becomes ever more open to self-expression, the damage you deal inexorably linked to the amount of fun that you're having. In a gaming landscape increasingly made up of free-roaming, open-ended games that give the player endless options for interaction, it demonstrates that a successful, enthusiastic illusion of freedom, life and chaos can be even better than the real thing.

The prevalence of vehicles, gun turrets and neutral robots to be taken over, along with a substantial set of customisation options and arenas, make the multiplayer game an unusually thoughtful inclusion

A FRIEND INDEED

Packaged in with the generous singleplayer campaign is a fully featured multiplayer mode. Along with gun emplacements and vehicles, levels feature a selection of prone enemy bot types, waiting for human players to take control of or recruit via grenade to add to their firepower. As a result, multiplayer becomes a battle for control of bot respawn points. The online potential for this mode can only be imagined – the end of the campaign leaves the story open for a sequel, but Blizzard's purchase of Swingin' Ape and the team's apparent dissolution means that the expansion of these ideas is left for other game series.

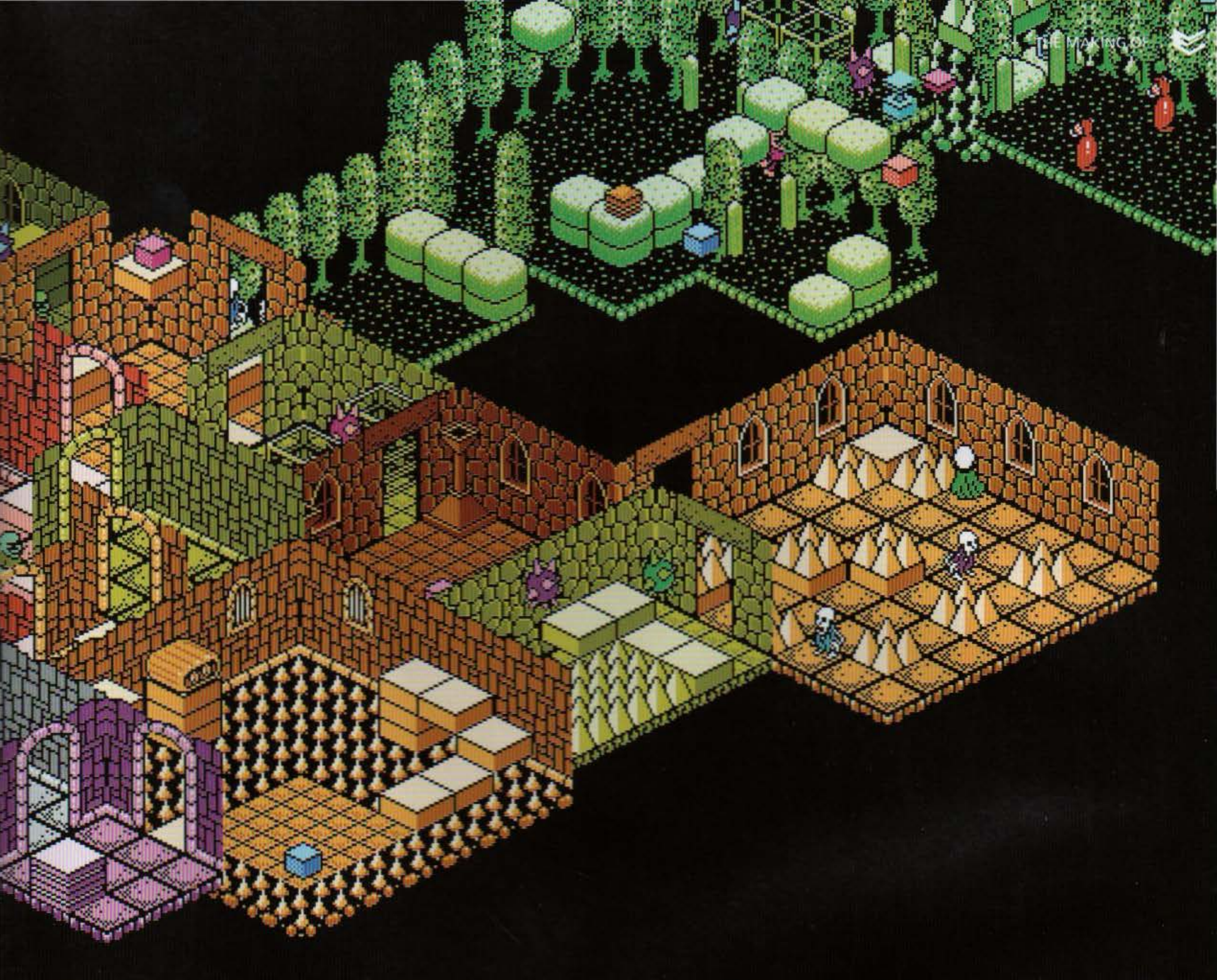
The boss battle that follows the early zombiebot-infested levels is notorious for combining tricky aiming and a creature that can withstand an extensive amount of punishment with, perhaps rather unfairly, a tight time limit. Consider it an induction rite



THE MAKING OF...
SOLSTICE: THE QUEST FOR THE STAFF OF DEMNOS

This puzzle-platformer masterpiece gave its developer a new direction, set new audio standards on the NES, and nearly scuppered its designer's career

FORMAT: **NES** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO/SONY IMAGESOFT (US)** DEVELOPER: **SOFTWARE CREATIONS** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **1991**



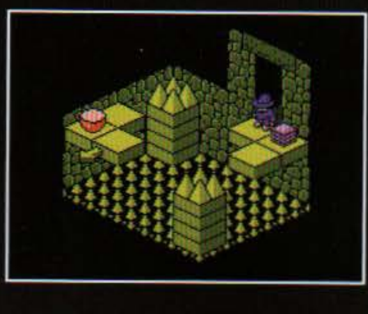
The trajectory of Software Creations was one of rapid ascent followed by almost instant evaporation – one of several unfortunately hapless development houses to be purchased by Acclaim shortly before that company's abrupt dissolution. While later achieving renown for *Plok* and a string of comic-book licences, some of Software Creations' short-lived success can be traced to *Solstice*, the title that saw the developer make the leap from porting games between 8bit consoles to independent development.

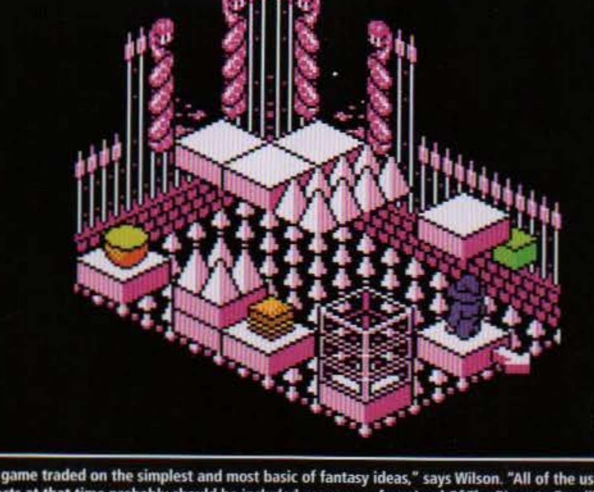
"Everything that Software Creations had developed up to that point had been conversions in one way or another," says **Mark Wilson**, the man responsible for the game's design and striking art style. "*Solstice* was the first original game that the company had attempted. I'd expect that moving into original games was always very likely because there was much more money to be made that way. Myself, I had no grand design I was following but I've always had a very low boredom threshold and designing a game was just something that I hadn't tried yet. Originally, I'd been forced by the Department for Social Security to take a job as a games programmer – with no prior experience! Finding that job too repetitive, I'd tried the graphics side of things instead, and I'd been doing that for a while when the opportunity presented itself to try designing a game instead."

"I had no grand design. I've always had a very low boredom threshold and designing a game was just something I hadn't tried yet"

At this time, Software Creations was still a small operation: 17 people in total, based in all of five rooms in an old newspaper office near the BBC on Oxford Road, Manchester. Alongside Wilson, the team behind *Solstice* numbered just two: programming responsibilities fell to Mike Webb, while **Tim Follin** created the game's remarkable soundtrack.

"The format of *Solstice* was entirely down to Mike Webb, who came into work one day with a method for doing a *Knightlore*-style isometric game on the NES," says Wilson of the division of labour. "Given that nobody else in the NES world had been able to think of a way of doing it with the extremely limited hardware, it seemed sensible to do an isometric game as our first original. Up until *Solstice* I'd strongly disliked isometric games and had never played any of them, so any major similarities in the puzzles between *Solstice* and its forerunners are just a coincidence prompted by a very limited range of possibilities. Having said that, we openly stole the isometric format itself, and obviously *Solstice* would not have existed if not for the examples set by *Knight Lore*, etc. I think it stood apart only by being on the NES!"





"The game traded on the simplest and most basic of fantasy ideas," says Wilson. "All of the usual suspects at that time probably should be included as sources, from Lord Of The Rings to Excalibur"

HOT CHIP

Follin suggests that he would not have been so musically audacious had the technical boundaries for that generation of hardware not already been reached: "A colleague played me lots of Rob Hubbard tunes, and I immediately realised that technically the bar had already been pushed as far as it could. It made me focus on the music rather than the technique, and also I knew that at the end of the day people respond far more to musical ideas than technical wizardry."



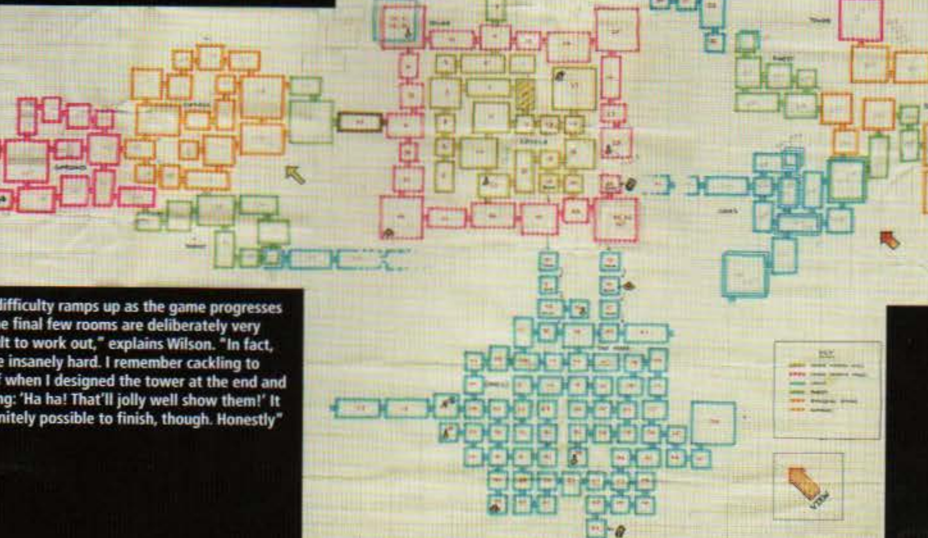
Wilson is, of course, wrong. *Solstice* stood apart from many earlier isometric-3D titles in a qualitative sense – as cohesive and considered a design remains a rarity among games. Though Webb was responsible for the technical achievement that brought *Solstice* to the NES, it was Wilson's task to take the game in a particular creative direction.

"I spent a long time doing a lot of thinking about the shape and flow of the game," Wilson recalls, "making sure everything seemed to follow naturally from one thing to the next. The whole game was designed as sketches and notes on paper, usually when I was sitting in the McDonald's on Oxford Road, drinking tea and looking out at the Manchester rain. All of the potions and events were positioned on a master map, hand-drawn on a very large piece of graph paper, and all of it was based on my understanding of what I thought the player would be thinking or needing at any particular point. Some values were tweaked once the game was up and running, but essentially nothing changed between my original sketches and the game."

Such attention to minutiae rapidly became a point of conflict, however: "Mike Webb and myself fought tooth and nail because Mike, although a decent enough programmer, didn't understand why anybody would ever spend four weeks designing a game, rather than just randomly putting some rooms into the map and being done with it. In fact, at one point he turned up at work and presented me with 'The Map' – a drawing of 255 randomly connected empty rooms that his girlfriend had come up with the night before. We argued. I felt quite guilty about the furious shouting matches, and I was so pleased with the finished game that in a spirit of giddy magnanimity I gave him a co-designer credit in the attract mode screens, something that I've regretted doing ever since. Never give away the credit, kiddo."

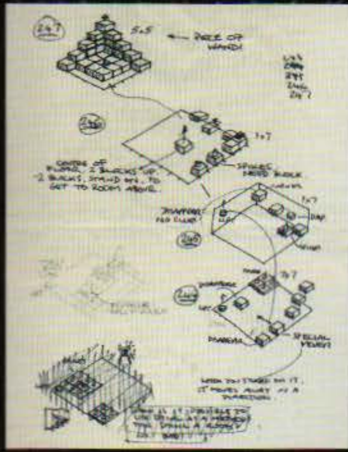
Yet *Solstice*'s taut structure was only part of what made it a success. The game had real character – the clean, stylised aesthetic, for which Wilson was once again responsible, was evocative despite of its simplicity. "It wasn't really possible to do very much storytelling within the cheapest NES cartridge that Nintendo made," says Wilson. "It was more a question of 'feel'. My main desire with *Solstice* was to arrive at something that had its own little atmosphere, as small a thing as that might seem. I have to say that without Tim's music it wouldn't be half as good as it is."

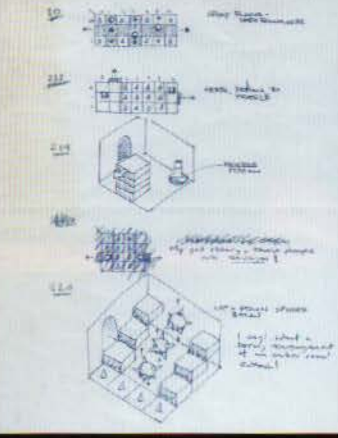
It's a compliment that fits. Tim Follin's eclectic and ever-changing soundtrack well establishes the mood of the game and its folkloric, Byzantine world, remaining one



"The difficulty ramps up as the game progresses and the final few rooms are deliberately very difficult to work out," explains Wilson. "In fact, they're insanely hard. I remember cackling to myself when I designed the tower at the end and thinking: 'Ha ha! That'll jolly well show them!' It is definitely possible to finish, though. Honestly"







"The structure of a game was controlled at least as much by the limitations of the hardware as it was by the designers' intentions," recalls Wilson. One consideration in *Solstice* was dreaded NES sprite-flicker

of the most memorable scores on the NES. "The only remit I had came from Mark Wilson, who basically let me get on with it. Those were the good old days," says Follin. "It seemed to me that the folk melody style I'd used for *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* would be particularly suited to *Solstice*, given the game's name and fantasy setting. But to me music has to constantly evolve to stay interesting, and this becomes imperative in game music, with its lack of vocals and performance. So the title tune travels through a number of different moods and phases, which is all an attempt to keep it interesting. I do feel I could have done a lot better with the in-game music, which looped too short and became irritating quite quickly, in my opinion. It could have been a lot more spacious and interesting."

While the game was received extremely well in Europe and Asia, it failed to make an impact in the US, for which Wilson blames its US publisher, Sony Imagesoft: "Richard Kay, the owner of Software Creations, was impatient and instantly sold the US rights to Sony Imagesoft. No sooner had he done that than Nintendo came back to us and said they wanted it, hence Nintendo published the title in the rest of the world. I quickly came to have a certain lack of respect for Sony Imagesoft at that point. The first thing they did was demand that we change the central character from a wizard to a bodybuilder in a loincloth. When I refused to make the changes, they demanded that at least the wizard's beard be shortened in the cutscenes. Those images were altered despite my protestations. Sony's ad campaign for *Solstice* in the US was a photograph of an oiled-up bodybuilder with long hair, wearing dayglo pink posing trunks and lime green pixie booties, and flexing whilst holding a chemistry lab flask in one hand and a scroll in the other. It was embarrassingly bad."

"Sony's ad campaign for Solstice in the US was a photo of an oiled-up bodybuilder with long hair wearing dayglo pink posing trunks"

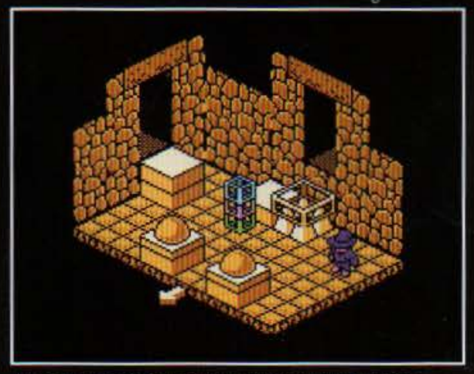


Mark Wilson (right) during "just another day at the office" – this particular office being the so-called 'Nintendo Room' at Software Creations

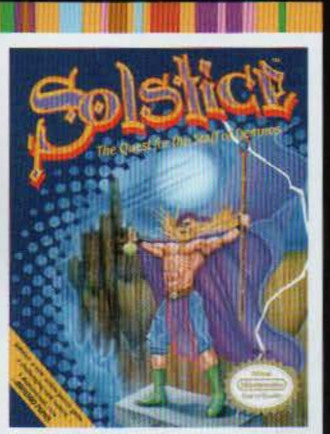
Just as *Solstice*'s prospects in the US were sabotaged by the incompetence of others, so Wilson found his own career in the UK plunging out of his control: "I'd spent the entire development time for *Solstice* trying vainly to get Software Creations to give me a contract covering *Solstice*. All I could get were a lot of verbal promises about the percentage I was going to get and how much money I was going to make. When we'd finished *Solstice*, the people responsible casually broke all of their promises to me and I've never made any money from the game. I left Software Creations after that. It didn't open any doors for me at all as nobody ever seemed to know I'd done it and I spent the next couple of years utterly flat broke and trying to find work. In fact, when I was interviewed at Microprose later on, one of the people interviewing me actually said: 'Oh no, I heard that Mike Webb designed that game'."

Wilson's career since, however, has been assuredly vertical, exhausting the variety of positions within the videogame industry before moving on to visual effects, and now working freelance.

"I'd consider working in games again in a supervisory position," he says, "although I think I have too much experience to comfortably fit in as a development artist, as I can imagine it being fairly awkward when you've not only done your supervisor's job but also his supervisor's job too – not to mention having been a designer and a programmer along the way as well."



"Musically, *Solstice* is probably as good as anything else I've written," claims Follin, "because back then music was something I enjoyed writing. [On later projects] I got bogged down with the production side, having to record and produce everything myself"



SONY, YET SO FAR

Wilson is justifiably bilious when it comes to Sony Imagesoft's handling of *Solstice* in the US: "I've no idea from which orifice Sony extracted the image that they eventually used on the box cover [above], but it had nothing to do with the game we'd written and it was inferior in every way to the cover art [created by Neal Sutton] we'd already supplied to them. Also, there's a mass of illiterate and asinine drivel in the handbook that somebody at Sony wrote, discarding what had already been written."



Studio profile

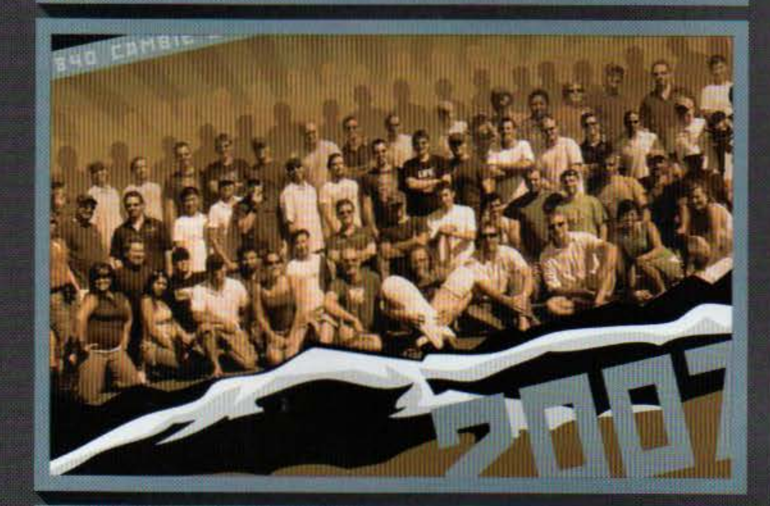
Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Action Pants, Inc

DATE FOUNDED: "When things got interesting"

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: "85 of the most daring adventurers have been drawn into action"

KEY STAFF: "Action Pants is a creative collective"



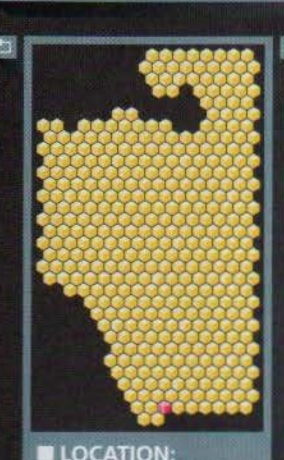
URL: www.actionpantsinc.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
"The adventure is underway..."



According to its founders, Action Pants is "a creative and collaborative environment with a vision for longterm sustainability and unlimited potential"





LOCATION:
Vancouver, Canada

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Currently undisclosed "AAA original IP for Xbox 360, PS3 and Wii consoles only"

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"In the golden age of adventure four individuals embarked on a mission to seek the unexplored and untapped edges of creativity. During their legendary travels they encountered unparalleled talent with diverse acumen far beyond the reaches of conventional technology.

Their quest? To discover an uncharted frontier where they could cultivate creative genius and attract like-minded individuals – individuals suitable for adventure. The four found their final destination. CANADA! Vancouver, British Columbia to be exact; a vibrant and beautiful city nestled amidst towering mountains and wind-swept seas.

Here, their creative vision was born – a place far removed from the regimented atmosphere of antiseptic and cubular staleness. Action Pants has been careful to attract a unique cross-section of highly talented men and women hailing from all parts of the globe. Their distinguished knowledge, gained from many different artistic arenas, allows original ideas to percolate and thrive as the vision of many is refined into a very ideal purpose: have a voice, embrace the challenges within a truly supportive atmosphere, and enjoy a genuine sense of ownership and accomplishment.

And the result – Action Pants, Inc – an inspiring odyssey of inventive development, imaginative art and a striking productivity few have encountered in their careers."



University profile

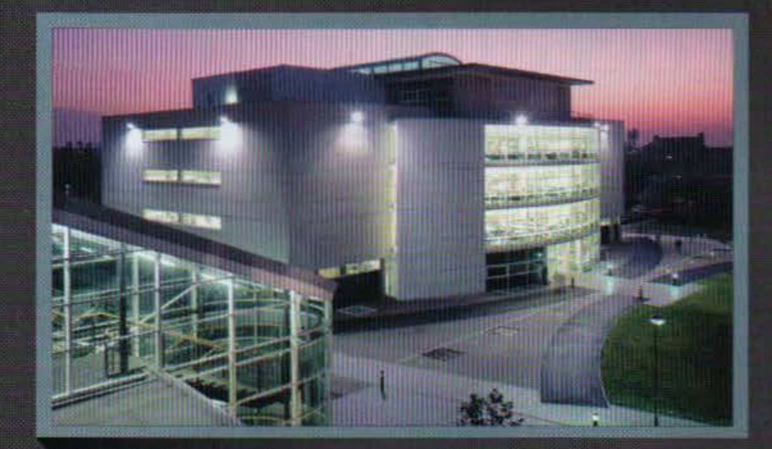
Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: University of Teesside

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 21,000

URL: www.tees.ac.uk

CONTACT: scm-undergraduate@tees.ac.uk, +44 (0)1642 342639

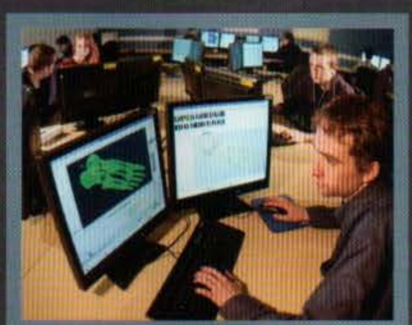


KEY STAFF

Paul Docherty, section head for games and animation; Keith Ditchburn, games programming coordinator; Mike Holton, senior lecturer in games design; Gabriel Kent, senior lecturer in games art; Heather Williams, senior lecturer in games art; Martin Kane, senior lecturer in games programming; Gwen Bosser, senior lecturer in games programming.

KEY ALUMNI

Dean Wilson, senior level designer, Rare; Kim Roberts and Steve Lee, mission designers, Midway; Chris Brooker, artist, Volition (a division of Blitz Games); Chris Hudson, artist, Blitz Games.







Opening the university's Olympia building, Tony Blair described Teeside as "getting an increasing reputation as a university that is going places"



LOCATION: Middlesbrough

COURSES OFFERED:
BA (Hons) Computer Games Art; BA (Hons) Computer Games Design; BSc (Hons) Computer Games Programming; BSc (Hons) Computer Games Science

INSIDE VIEWS



Steve Kay: BA (Hons) Computer Games Design

"The university is great – I'd definitely encourage anyone to study here. Being surrounded by such a strong presence of designers and animators can really inspire you.

"I chose this course because it offered a variety of modules rather than being targeted at one area in particular. The course structure was very well thought out; it allowed us to tailor our degrees to suit our personal desires. The course at Teeside seemed to be perfect for what I wanted to do, and the university had a good reputation for modern IT facilities. With courses like Games and Animation such technology is essential so it was great to have access to it."

Kazuko Uchida: BA (Hons) Creative Visualisation

"I chose to study at Teesside because the course looked interesting, with games, animation and multimedia all at the same time. I'm a very keen games player but was aware that most games are designed from a male point of view. For my final-year project I designed a computer game for women. I have now won one of the university's DigitalCity Fellowships and am working on developing my project to industry standards as I'd love to see the game manufactured.

"The facilities at the university are amazing, like a castle full of treasure – the services are excellent and the people very helpful."



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Behind the Autodesk

This year's models of 3DS Max and Maya may give 'superior results, faster', but the company is also looking towards future features

www.autodesk.com

In life, the only things we're said to be able to rely on are death and taxes. In the case of the annual product announcements from 3D modelling and animation software vendor Autodesk, however, the two pillars of certainty seem to be improvements in performance and workflow efficiency.

The ability to handle increasingly complex scenes is a feature that's been highlighted in many versions of 3DS

In fact, they've become such regular headlines as products such as 3DS Max and Maya have clicked through their respective 7, 8 and 9, and 6, 7 and 8 version releases since Autodesk bought rival Alias that, like certain sporting surnames (Gerrard and Wilkinson, for instance), you have to assume they're the first things to be pencilled on to the release list.

"The industry is changing at a very fast pace. Performance is always going to be an issue. You just can't get away from that," reckons senior product manager **Rob Hoffman**. "It's basic stuff. We're always reviewing how our products work and making sure they do what an artist would expect. We look to invest in areas that are going to address the largest number of customers, whether that's performance or changes to the user interface that mean you can do things faster. Why do something in eight steps when you can do it in two, right? Artists need to be able to focus on the art itself rather than the tools they have."

But aside from these changes, and Autodesk's decision to tweak the nomenclature for its products – this year's releases of 3DS Max and Maya

Overview: 3DS Max 2008

One of the main areas of improvement in 3DS Max concerns its underlying architecture, which has been optimised so it can handle large scenes containing thousands of objects. Combined with this is a new scene explorer, which provides what's called a hierarchical view of scene data that, together with a level-of-detail system, means the resolution of complex scenes can be automatically simplified to ensure that the framerate during the creation and editing process remains at a useable level.

Also providing an indirect boost to such features is support for Windows Vista and DirectX 10, which as well as providing better performance, enables realtime previewing of complex lighting within the 3DS Max viewport. This includes things such as material textures, shadows and simplified indoor lighting using the mental ray renderer's Sky Portal feature.

Finally, a new editor, called the ProEditor, has been added to the MAXscript language. This offers a more intuitive way to write scripts, which Autodesk hopes will enable a wider range of artists to customise and automate functions with 3DS Max.

The product (for 32 and 64bit Windows XP and Vista) is due to be released in October. It will cost $3,495 (£1,723), while an update from 3DS Max 9 will cost $795 (£392). Subscription packages, which include a year's worth of updates, product extensions and e-learning materials, cost $495 (£244).



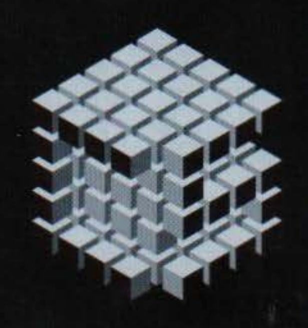
The adaptive degradation system in 3DS Max 2008 will enable artists to pre-set a frames-per-second limit, with the system then automatically using level-of-detail optimisation to make sure this requirement is met







Maya's nCloth softbody solvers now perform up to three times faster thanks to the optimisations within Maya 2008



will be known as 3DS Max 2008 and Maya 2008 (and so on in future) – more overt changes seem to be on the cards in future.

"We hold regular CTO summits and games advisory councils where we get some of the larger game studios in and work with them over the direction for future requirements," Hoffman explains. "It's an opportunity for us to get a better idea of what projects they have coming up and what challenges they'll have to overcome, as well as putting our best thinking caps on and considering what production challenges people are going to be facing five years from now.

"So while performance and workflow efficiency are areas that have seen a lot of investment over the past couple of releases, it's been a case of making sure our house is in order. You'll see some cool new stuff coming out in the future."

Overview: Maya 2008

When it comes to Maya 2008, its performance upgrade was specifically focused into better support for multi-core processors. This, Autodesk claims, has resulted in speed boosts of between three and 30 times, depending on the type of operation.

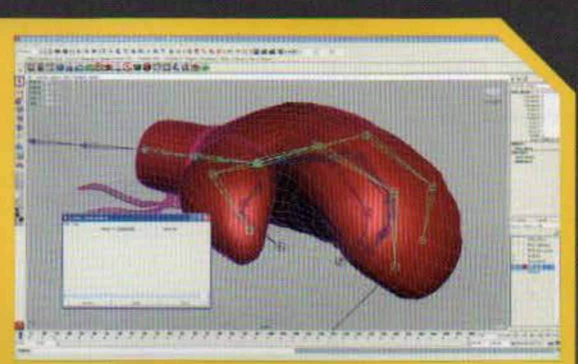
"We've gone through the software and made a lot of algorithmic improvements, revisiting the underlying algorithms that run Maya and seeing what we could do to make them substantially faster," explains Hoffman.

The package's polygon-modelling tools have been tweaked, too. "We don't need the new 'make monster' button. It's a case of taking the tools we already have and making them work the way people need them to," Hoffman says. "In this release, there are major improvements to the Booleans, bevel and bridge tools, which were some of the tools artists were having issues with."

In addition, animation tools have been given the once-over, with the improved skinning and rigging toolsets including better non-destructive skin editing capabilities. Finally, a game-specific feature is the new shader API with native support for OpenGL and DirectX hardware shaders in Maya's viewport.

Released in September, Maya 2008 supports 32 and 64bit versions of Windows XP and Vista, Linux and Mac OS X for Intel-based Macs. It also supports the 32bit version of OS X for PowerPC computers.

Pricing is $2,000 (£985) for Maya 2008 Complete, and $7,000 (£3,445) for Maya 2008 Unlimited. The upgrade price from Maya 8.5 Complete is $900 (£443), and from Maya 8.5 Unlimited is $1,250 (£615). Software updates, technical support case management, product extensions and e-learning materials are available via Platinum Membership for $1,300 (£640) per year.



Maya 2008 introduces a new non-destructive skinning system, which allows animators to work intuitively on a bound skeleton after skinning has been set up



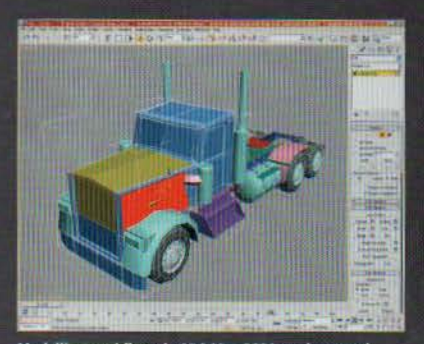
"Why do something in eight steps when you can do it in two? Artists need to be able to focus on the art"

One of the areas that seems a likely source of inspiration is Autodesk's proposed acquisition of Weta Digital spin-out Skymatter. Its 3D sculpting package Mudbox, which was used in many of the first wave of PlayStation 3 titles such as *MotorStorm* and *Heavenly Sword*, fills what Hoffman confesses is a gap within Autodesk's product line-up.

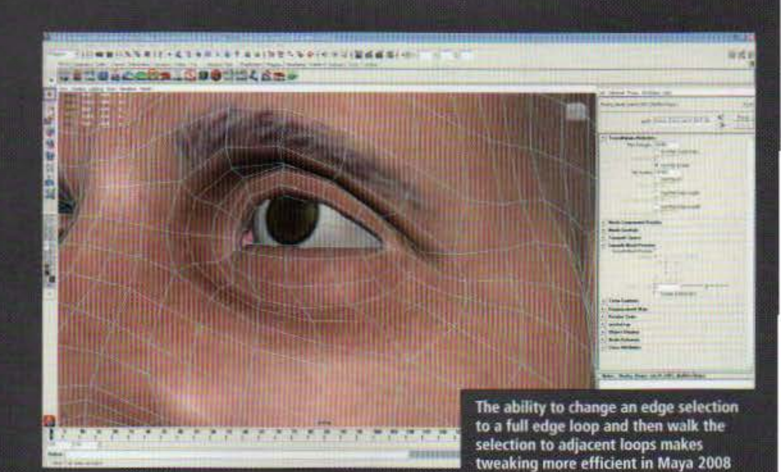
"You can do some sculpting-type work within Max and Maya but it's rudimentary. That's why these specialist packages such as ZBrush, modo and Mudbox came to light. We didn't really have any robust, organic modelling tools, so we looked at Mudbox and we are where we are today," Hoffman says of the decision to buy Skymatter. Although with the deal expected to be completed sometime in October, he's keen not to say too much about Autodesk's future plans for the product or company.

What seems likely, however, is that while Mudbox will remain available as a standalone product, elements of it will, in time, migrate within existing Autodesk packages, while product interoperability is sure to be on the to-do list as well.

"I think this is going to be a very good deal," Hoffman continues. "The guys at Skymatter became victims of their own success. They had to start dealing with things like marketing, support and writing documentation, all of which distracted them from what they really wanted to do. Now, though, they'll be able to get back to what they want to do, so I think future development will move at a much faster pace."



Modelling workflows in 3DS Max 2008 are improved thanks to tools such as sub-object selection previewing



The ability to change an edge selection to a full edge loop and then walk the selection to adjacent loops makes tweaking more efficient in Maya 2008

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

WHY IT FEELS GOOD TO BE BAD

BY N'GAI CROAL

Warning: This column contains spoilers for several games. Proceed with caution.

For all the talk of putting more emotion in games – most notably, former Electronic Arts Los Angeles chief Neil Young's public references to his company's slogan of yesteryear: "Can a computer game make you cry?" – it would thus far appear that there are a limited number of emotions that games have become expert at eliciting, and a whole slew at which games have a long, long way to go. One thing that videogames are indisputably good at is making us feel, well, good.

While we're playing, games may challenge us, frustrate us, torment us, even enrage us, but at the end of it all, we're generally meant to be left with a feeling of exhilaration and a sense of accomplishment. But what about games that make us feel bad? I don't mean whether or not you cried when Aeris was killed in *Final Fantasy VII*. I mean a game that manages to make you feel ashamed about something you've done.

I had occasion to consider this recently when my friend and fellow blogger, MTV News reporter Stephen Totilo, wrote a post about his experience playing the final case in *Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney 2: Justice For All*. In it, the titular player-protagonist, whose clients have all in fact been innocent, comes to believe that he is now defending a guilty man, yet he must continue to do so to the best of his ability. Totilo wrote that unlike other games that had tried and failed, *Phoenix Wright 2* had succeeded in making him feel like a bad guy. In a comment on Totilo's blog, I asked: 'How would you feel about an entire series of *Phoenix Wright* games based around this concept: a lawyer game in which your entire client roster – conmen, polluters, thieves, harassers, murderers, embezzlers and war criminals – were guilty, and your job was to secure their acquittals? Would you play *Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney Gaiden: The Ends Justify The Means*? Would it be fun for you?'

Part of what prompted the question was my playthrough of *BioShock*. I'd planned from the beginning to harvest the Little Sisters, but when it came time to do so, I very nearly lost my nerve. Credit to 2K Boston/Australia's pitch-perfect presentation of the Little Sisters, Big Daddies, and the entire world – the game's sense of place is so forcefully established that for days after, I found myself dreaming of Rapture – for stopping me dead in my tracks to ask myself, 'Can I really go through with this?'

> BioShock won't sell like Gears Of War, but it already feels as though it's going to be one of this generation's most influential games

About 15 minutes or so later I did, but not before going so far as to reach out, unsuccessfully, to friends and family for their advice on what I should do. I still think that *BioShock* could have tightened the screws a notch with its portrayal of the harvesting – it was cautiously oblique rather than inventively suggestive – but it set up a wonderfully dispiriting moment later on when, after ending up in Dr Tenebaum's hideout for rescued Little Sisters, one of them looked at me and said, simply: "He's the one who hurts us." I've killed hundreds, if not thousands, of aliens, demons, Nazis and terrorists over the course of my gaming career without even batting an eye, but that line expertly stuck the knife in, causing me to regret the path I'd taken. It's a disconcerting feeling, one that videogames rarely provoke, and it's something I'd like to see more of.

The challenge developers face when trying to put gamers in situations where the gamer is forced to interrogate the nature of what he or she is doing is that the gamer can always fall back on a familiar defence: I was just following (the developer's) orders. Titles like *BioShock* and *Manhunt* explicitly weave the notion of the developer-as-dominant, player-as-submissive into the very fabric of their narratives: *Manhunt* does so almost right from the beginning, after the player awakes in Carcer City, while *BioShock* saves its revelation of the player's less-than-free-will for a mid-game shocker. *Shadow Of The Colossus*, by contrast, does this more indirectly, suggesting first through the majestic art direction and mournful animation of the Colossi, and ultimately through the repetitiveness of its stripped-down hunt-down-and-kill-the-16-bosses structure, that our hero's journey may not in fact be that heroic.

Still, it's a tactic that more developers would do well to explore, given how memorable these rare complications of our emotional responses can be. *Shadow Of The Colossus* wasn't a blockbuster, but the frequency with which it's cited in 'are games art?' debates indicates both a medium still in its aesthetic infancy and a videogame that punched above its weight. *BioShock* won't sell like *Gears Of War*, but it already feels as though it's going to be one of this generation's most influential games. And if *Mass Effect* can deliver on its early promise of confronting players with thorny moral choices and the consequences of their actions, perhaps other creators will see that making the player feel bad can be a good thing after all.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/



BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

DOWN WITH PHYSICS

BY MR BIFFO

I'm not a great fan of Terry Pratchett. I appreciate that he has his admirers, but I've tried his books, and found them to be... well, the sorts of things fat virgins laugh at.

However, Pratchett once said that "Fantasy is an exercise bicycle for the mind. It might not take you anywhere, but it tones up the muscles that can". Despite not liking his books, I can't help but think he's right on that score.

Alas, it seems that this is something the videogame industry is in desperate need of being reminded of. Speaking at this year's Siggraph, Electronic Arts' chief technical officer **Glenn Entis** told an audience that game developers had a duty to make games realistic in ways other than purely through graphics.

He echoes an issue I raised not so long ago in this very column; that you can throw all the polygons and light sources in the world at a game character, but what's the point if he's going to shuffle around like he has brittle knees, and jerks from one animation cycle to the next with all the grace of a pilled-up alpaca?

"It's about worlds that look beautiful, but behave beautifully as well," Entis barked. And he has a point.

Regrettably, I fear that Entis' definition of beautiful differs from my own. Much like so many game developers, EA is obsessed with recreating reality. With EA's forthcoming Xbox 360 title *Virtual Me*, players will be able to recreate themselves, taking unprecedented control over their game character's physical appearance and wardrobe. I mean, that's all well and good, but what's the point? If you want to take unprecedented control over your own wardrobe just go to Primark. If you want to change your appearance get a haircut, or, I dunno, wear a false nose.

Whatever happened to projecting yourself upon a fictional character? If we're getting to that stage it's as if games have become like those books you can buy for toddlers, where you've sent off a photo of them to have it superimposed over the face of the main character in the book (be it superhero, or a pirate, or leathersmith).

We seem to be moving further and further away from the kinds of fantasy or abstract environments that used to typify games. Now that it is easier to recreate a virtual version of reality, it's like the industry is obsessed with doing so, as if that's the pinnacle of what interactive entertainment should be.

LittleBigPlanet is a good case in point. Admittedly, you're controlling fantasy characters in a sort of fantasy environment, but they look like a version of reality, in a world that utilises a fairly convincing recreation of our real-world physics. It's a hybrid between the games of yore and the way games are becoming.

> We seem to be moving further and further away from the kinds of fantasy or abstract environments that used to typify games

I mean, would *Sonic The Hedgehog* or *Pac-Man* really have been improved with photorealistic graphics, or real-world physics? Of course not (I was going to add *Tetris* to the above list, but that could actually work quite well). Doing that would've unbalanced some beautifully tuned gameplay, and robbed the world of some of gaming's most iconic moments. The day Nintendo introduces realistic physics into a Mario game is the day I go upon a catastrophic death-rampage.

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for realism up to a point. I mean, the likes of *Splinter Cell* wouldn't be in any way improved by making it more cartoony, or setting it in the distant shadowrealms of Kel-Da-Roth. Nevertheless, for me one of the big appeals of games is that they are a window on to fantasy. I don't mean fantasy in the dragons/elves/breaking-into-people's-cottages-to-smash-their-vases sense of the word, but in the more general sense of being transported to somewhere that isn't real.

Somewhere that stimulates the creative nodes, and fires up the imagination. Something – somewhere – that knows it's a game. The more real our gameworlds become, the more mundane we risk them becoming.

It's like the Shrek films. When the first Shrek came out it was a feast for the eyes, purely from an 'isn't that clever?!' perspective, but I kind of found the recent release of Shrek The Third to be completely pointless. If you're going to create a CGI world that's only one step away from our real world, then why not just make a live-action movie? I utterly lament the death of traditional, hand-drawn movie animation in much the same way I hate how realistic physics are being applied to every other game.

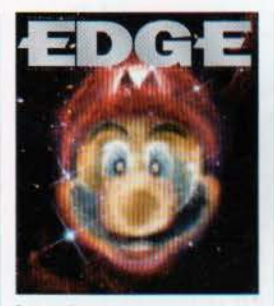
Admittedly, I'm at every risk here of coming across like a woeful nostalgic. Part of me remains hopeful this is just a transition period, and that once they've decoded the genome of realistic physics and animation then all of that will take a backseat to the fantasy.

Nevertheless, realistic physics is all about maths, and in maths there's no soul. You don't ask an accountant to paint your portrait, and I think it's time that games were taken out of the hands of the technologists and given back to the artists.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox



Issue 180

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Are there too many shooters?

Sure, there are shooters of all sorts and flavours, but they are all shooters. For God's sake, developers! There are other kinds of action games, you know. The situation reminds me of the late 16bit console era, when developers were churning out a ton of 'me too' platformers. The whole thing sank faster than the Titanic. But at least then we had the upcoming 32bit generation to look forward to; now we have zilch.
mandelbrot78

People like shooting things.
Unlikely

I like shooting things too, but I also like to beat my enemies to a pulp, decapitate them, sneak up from behind and stick a broken bottle into their throats, etc.
mandelbrot78

Take guns out of games and *Pokémon Snap* is your reward.
ZeldaMindMelder

While reading your Top 100 Games edition I realised I had a lot of the games mentioned. For a laugh I thought I'd try and get the full 100.

I posted what I was planning on a couple of gaming forums and, apart from the expected 'you are an idiot', 'you have more money then sense' comments, some people were extremely helpful in locating (selling me) games. As I get closer to the full 100 a few of them suggested I should write to you to let you know what I was doing.

Ebay has been my main supplier, but this hasn't always been easy or cheap! Often the games have been rare and keenly collected, and no doubt your publication has raised prices, too.

I'm down to my final three now – *Thief*, *System Shock 2* and *Secret Of Mana*. *System Shock 2* seems to be very expensive, as is *Secret Of Mana*. *Thief* appears to be non-existent in its original PC release box, but I will find it. I have tried to get the 'proper' versions – eg, *Rez* on Dreamcast rather than PS2. Of the games where you have mentioned the arcade units I have had to do the best I could.

I suppose thanks is in order as well – you have opened my eyes to some amazing games that normally I would never have looked at.

Superjoe

Good work. You'll devote as much energy to playing them, too, yes?

I expect bugs from a PC game, but now consoles have hard drives and internet access, can we expect more of the 'patch it after release' philosophy?

I downloaded *Warhawk* soon after reading your review in **E**180. I wouldn't normally give a game of its genre a second glance but with its price tag and online delivery on top of the review it was given, I gave it a go. Worth every penny.

For all the kudos the game gets for being one of the 'vanguard of big-name titles' for the PlayStation Network, the execution of a lot of the supporting infrastructure is a little below par for today's standards. There's not nearly enough official servers to cope, and they seem to go down quite frequently. For a non-official server to host a ranked game, the host can't participate, which means the vast majority of servers are unranked. You can't queue for a server, either. The pre-game interface isn't buggy, it's just plain unfinished: when you try to join a server from your 'favourites' list, you'll be told that your rank is too high even when you know it's not.

I'd expect bugs like that from a PC game, not a console game. Now that consoles have hard drives and internet access, can we expect more of the 'patch it after release' philosophy?

An online gamer's first reaction, when it appears that a game's servers are down, is to Google for the game's server status page or load it up from his/her bookmarks. There isn't one. The 'official' forum is a subforum of playstation.com, and you'll find no announcements from Incognito or SCEE there. Incognitogames.com doesn't even mention *Warhawk*. It's almost as if they don't want to be contacted (is their name coincidental?).

Hollywood does better than this. For almost a year before Transformers was released, fans could get in touch with writers and producers via various message boards (I zealously insisted to as many official people as I could find that they'd make sure the game would get proper treatment).

All in all it's been rather sloppy, which is a shame because the game is so good. To whom should I direct my anger? Is it the developers or the producers who should be blamed for all this support infrastructure tardiness?

Steve Munro

Warhawk's network support at launch certainly calls into question Sony's decentralised online multiplayer strategy. At the time of writing, we're assured that fixes are in the works.



The best letter wins a DS Lite

I'm writing to you to bring up what I think is quite an important point. Sony is currently not doing as well as its competitors in terms of hardware sales.

One of the primary reasons for this is that PlayStation 3 and PSP cost more than their competitors' systems. But while Sony may be reading the figures and frowning, we can rejoice because as Sony lags behind it means that we're getting amazing deals. PlayStation 3 costs £425 and with that you can get an extra controller and two games. To put



that into perspective, an Xbox 360 Elite, two £39.99 games and a wireless controller would cost just under £413. Suddenly the PlayStation 3 isn't that much more expensive, considering you also get a Blu-ray player.

However, the PSP is really the console we can reap the benefits of. While the DS Lite outsells it by a huge margin, the price has not changed, but the PSP is constantly going down in price. The new PSP costs only £129.99. The DS Lite costs £99.99. So for £30 more you are getting a more powerful (but not necessarily better) games console, an MP3, video and UMD player, and (soon) a piece of hardware on which you will get on-demand video from Sky.

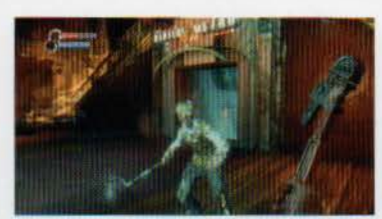
One could argue that the DS Lite has better games, which is probably true, but due to its success these games all cost either £24.99 or £29.99, and PSP also has some very good games that are incredibly cheap to boot. Because so few buy them, retailers are constantly reducing their prices. At Virgin, *Exit* costs only £10, *Burnout Dominator* £13, *Vice City Stories* £15 and *LocoRoco* £15. The list goes on at other retailers such as Game and Amazon (here you can get *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* for £16.47).

Sony is currently not doing as well as its competitors in terms of hardware sales, but we can rejoice because it means that we're getting amazing deals

As a young reader I have less money to spend on games, so when I saw these prices it finally persuaded me to buy a PSP (when the new one came out). I'm sure I sound like a Sony fanboy, but I assure you I am not, I just think people should take advantage of this great opportunity. It reminds of the time *Oddworld Stranger's Wrath* came out and was awarded a 9 out of 10, yet commercially it was a complete failure. But that meant Game was selling the title for only a tenner.

So while it makes me very happy that Nintendo is finally getting the commercial success it deserves with the DS and Wii, ironically I have now been tempted by the cheap prices of Sony's handheld.

Tom Hussi



Angela Brown claims that simply *watching* a Big Daddy taking down splicers in *BioShock* is 'enough interaction' for anyone, and that all of the game's flaws can be overlooked

In your recent review of *BioShock* you mention that one of the main flaws of the game is that the world of Rapture contains creatures that don't react to one another in a proper fashion. Little Sisters are not harmed by splicers once you kill their bodyguards... This claim really nagged at me. When you kill the Big Daddy, the Little Sister stands by the body of her friend and protector, and weeps openly. It's a strange and sad thing to watch. And yet you guys stand there and think: 'Hmm, that's weird. I didn't pay £35 or £45 not to see a little girl thing get ripped apart by insane mutants. Poor show'. How many dead bodies in a war game are left to rot, without any fanfare or tears?

No offence, but this is another sign that when it comes to the world of Rapture you guys can be colder than the icy waters which surround the place (see Mike Sloane's letter from last month's **Edge** for further evidence of this). *BioShock* is one of those amazing games that manages to combine a number of elements such as fantastic storytelling, original enemies and interesting player powers, and yet all you do is whine about how it's not quite perfect.

I understand that you, as a magazine, are always on the lookout for games that encourage more people to play. You are a magazine about videogame culture, after all. But you speak about the game as if you haven't played it – or as if this is a game whose flaws are so huge that they cannot be overlooked, and that's just not the case. Watching a Big Daddy crush one of the freakish splicers is enough interaction for me, and anybody else.

Angela Brown

The issue is that *BioShock* promises so much but doesn't quite deliver, painting a world so compelling that when things don't behave consistently they feel terribly conspicuous. And what's wrong with striving for perfection?

F

Topic: The changing face of the arcade

It was nice of the manufacturers to provide the little ashtrays for smokers when playing on their machines but I'd imagine they're a thing of the past now since the ban on smoking in public places. Or are arcades exempt because the government don't want any trouble from the ne'er-do-wells who frequent them?
Chilly Willy

I used to like arcade cabs with no ashtray but a series of burns above the P1 and P2 Start buttons where people would rest their cigarettes anyway.
freethinker

What was really cool was the way we used to put our quarters in the marquee holder slot to mark our place in the queue for *Street Fighter*.
Glitzerstrahl

What was cool was when you waited for the dude in the kiosk to go for a piss when you were playing the 10p fountains. You could batter the things and tip them over without him hearing the alarms going off. Fun times.
ScotsWahey

There's nothing more annoying than a pub quiz machine designed specifically with no flat surfaces to put a pint on. All quiz machines should have pint holders.
bombfrog

I'm fairly certain they're designed so you don't store your drinks on them, what with beer and electronics being such unhappy bedfellows.
ubermod

Apparently the top of the PS3 is curved to stop anyone from chopping up cocaine on it. Also the blue light on the Wii is there to stop you finding a vein whilst playing *Red Steel*. I think it's okay to smoke tobacco at home, though.
BlueAsbestos

Let's say you're in the middle of reading a gripping novel. You've got a nice bunch of pages in your hands and you're wondering when to take a break, so you check how many you've still got left. You're halfway through; there is still plenty of time before you set out on the final sprint, the one that usually postpones sleep well into the small hours.

Now switch on your dusty GameCube and load your latest save of, let's say, *Eternal Darkness*. How long still to go? Quite a question, really. As a novice there is no way of telling; as a videogame veteran you might know slightly better. Things such as some of those still-empty rune slots. Things such as screenshots on boxes, sites, magazines, things you've still to see for yourself. Nonetheless, you can never, ever know for sure how many 'pages' you've got left. You can never know, then, if this is the night you need to get ready for that final sprint.

Sure, people read at different speeds just like people play at different speeds. But readers always know how long they have to read before the end of the chapter, and so know how to manage their time. The same luxury is not granted to players, unless you bestow the power to save at any time. You have to play on, until the next typewriter, until you've got your sneakers in a twist because dinner's ready and your only bookmark is a start button that's going to ruin your game stats, or worse, skip the cutscene or dialogue you're on.

When it comes to media unfit for our tight time schedules, videogames are a main offender. If videogames' competitors are other forms of entertainment, then isn't it about time we studied enemy tactics a bit harder? Or do I still need to deal with my pissed-off fiancée every time she calls

Continued ›

me to the dinner table… having then to forget about 'dessert'?
Paolo Simone Maria

And it's during online sessions that inability to pause bites the most. Perhaps a shiny new DS that you can take to the dinner table with you may help to deal with the problem.

As I opened the packaging to E180 your latest guide about getting into games fell into my lap. This is the second one that I've looked at and both times I've been struck by the fact that you've not provided information about testing even though poor QA is often the first thing to be blamed. I wonder if this is because it's not perceived as an exciting role and appears to be an afterthought in so many places.

Without adequate time and resources spent on testing a good game can be ruined, yet so often testing time is made shorter as internal deadlines slip and the developer tries to keep to delivery milestones.

I suppose my question to you is why you haven't covered any aspect of testing? Is that because there aren't dedicated test teams in development houses? (And if not, why not?) Is testing bolted on at the end where a group of people are contracted out to test the game (which from talking to one of my friends is a lot less fun than it sounds)? Or did you, like so many project managers, forget that we even exist? As a tester it often feels as though we are simply accommodated rather than actively thought of as being as vital to a team as a programmer. If we don't do our job customer perception is tainted and a good product struggles. Programmers and project managers seem to resent us as we're seen as being a drain – we produce nothing, we need time they feel they need, and cause work by pointing out problems big (crashes) and small (spelling mistakes) – rather than understanding that we're helping to ensure that the final product lives up to everyone's expectations, and making sure that we all have another project to work on.

So, spare a thought for those of us who have to work out how idiots might use a game whilst ensuring that we're standards compliant and are fulfilling the entire feature set. Flawlessly.
Steve Dowling

We have covered testing in the past, but don't cover every role every time we publish a new edition of GIG. We'll look at QA again next year.



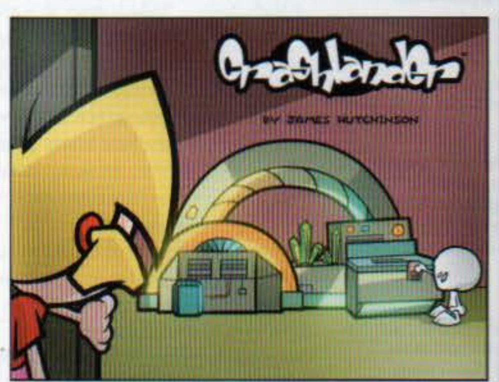
Topic: Gambling + killing = Kwari

Does it look like it will actually work? It all sounds decidedly dodgy to me, but it's preferable to cockfighting, I suppose.
tin robot

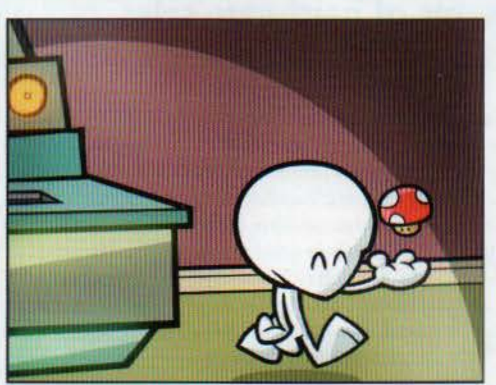
I can actually see this becoming very, very addictive. The money element is also much more abstract, and from the sound of the Edge article, in constant flux. More so than other traditional online gambling games. I reckon you could lose track of your losses or winnings very quickly.
Time on my hands

The Kwari website wins most ridiculous breasts of the day. Not as big an achievement as it would have been in the '90s, but still quite a respectable feat.
AJ-D

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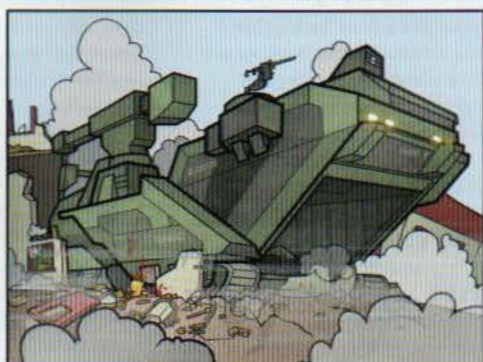












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